XII
Tearmoon Empire
Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrator: Gilse

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Characters

Tearmoon Empire

Mysterious Girl

She may have appeared with Bel, but...

Granddaughter and Grandmother

Miabel

After an arrow pierced her throat, she disappeared into the light. Now, she has reappeared, looking a bit older.

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. She successfully avoids a repeat encounter with the guillotine, but then Bel shows up...

The Four Dukes' Families

Ruby

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon. A gallant lady with a wardrobe to match.

Citrina

The only daughter of the House of Yellowmoon. Bel's first friend.

Esmeralda

The eldest daughter of the House of Greenmoon. Self-proclaimed best friend of Mia.

Sapphias

The eldest son of the House of Bluemoon. Got into the student council thanks to Mia.

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. Ardently believes in Mia and is trying to make her Empress.

Anne

Mia's maid. Born into a poor family of merchants. Mia's loyal subject.

Archenemesis

Dion

The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

※ Future Timeline Relationship

※ Previous Timeline Relationship

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother. Super smart. Developed cold-resistant wheat.

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. Looks up to Mia. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army.

Revolution

Archnemesis

Assistance

Archnemesis

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant. A cynic. But a competent one.

Sion

Crown Prince. All-round genius. In the previous timeline he was Mia's archnemesis, aided Tiona and eventually became known as the "Penal King." In the present he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed with a specific goal in mind.

Support

Support

Holy Principality of Belluga

Rafina

The duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's de facto decision-maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Kingdom of Remno

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he works to diligently improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

The only heir of Marco Forkroad, whose company spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

Tearmoon Empire

Nina
Esmeralda's maid-in-waiting.

Balthazar
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Gilbert
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Musta
Head chef of the imperial court of the Tearmoon Empire.

Elise
Anne's younger sister and the second daughter of the Littstein family. Mia's court author.

Liora
Tiona's maid. Hails from the Lulu tribe who live in the forest. An expert archer.

Vanos
Dion's adjutant and former vice-captain of a hundred-man squad in Tearmoon's imperial army. A giant of a man.

Matthias
Mia's father. Tearmoon's emperor. Dotes on his daughter.

Adelaide
Mia's mother. Deceased.

Galv
An old wiseman and master to Ludwig.

Outcount Rudolvon
Father to Tiona and Cyril.

Equestrian Kingdom

Aima
Descendant of the Fire Clan. Mia's friend.

Malong
Mia's senior. Club leader of Saint-Noel Academy's Horsemanship Club.

Kuolan
A Moonhare. Mia's favorite horse.

Kingdom of Sunkland

Monica
A member of the White Crows. Infiltrated the Kingdom of Remno as an attendant to Abel.

Graham
A member of the White Crows. He is Monica's superior.

Merchants

Marco
Chloe's father. Head of Forkroad & Co.

Shalloak
A powerful merchant who sells all sorts of goods to kingdoms throughout the continent.

Kingdom of Remno

Lynsha
The daughter of a fallen noble familyin Remno. She attends Saint-Noel Academy while working as Rafina's maid

Lambert
Lynsha's older brother.

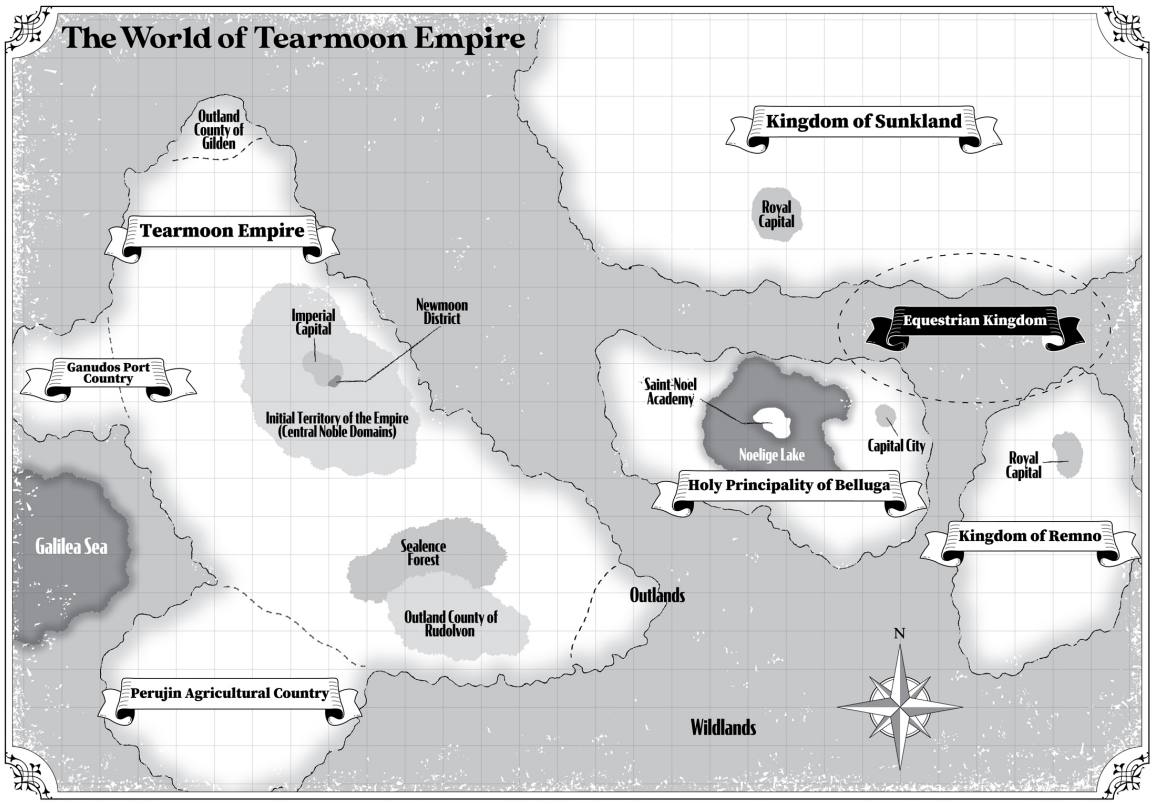
Perujin Agricultural Country

Rania
The third princess of Perujin. Mia's schoolmate.

Arshia
The second princess of Perujin. Rania's older sister.

Story

Mia, the reviled selfish princess of the Tearmoon Empire, is executed by revolutionary forces, only to wake up as a twelve-year-old again after somehow leaping backward through time. Using the bloodstained diary that came with her, she makes every effort to reform the workings of the imperial government and escapes the guillotine! But then, her granddaughter Bel comes from the future to inform her of Tearmoon's demise. While Bel was lost in a battle with the cunning Chaos Serpents, she appears once again—this time older—and with a mysterious girl...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Outland County of Gilden
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Equestrian Kingdom
Ganudos Port Country
Saint Noel Academy
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Noelige Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Holy Principality of Belluga
Galilea Sea
Sealence Forest
Kingdom of Remno
Outlands
Outland County of Rudolvon
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands

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Prologue: The Nightmare of a (Delicate) Princess

We turn back time to just a few days before Bel reappeared. Mia was...*running*!

Huff! Huff! Huff!

She ran for her life, kicking up debris from the roadside as she went. She had no one to guard her and no maids to care for her. She alone made her escape.

She glanced behind her. Armed men were hot on her tail.

"You've been cornered! Give up!"

"This is for my child! He died because of you!"

Still, their words could not stop Mia's feet. Diligently, frantically, she hurdled her way forward. Her breath began to escape her. Her feet were in pain. Her chest felt crushed. Branches had scraped her legs and left a throbbing pain. Eventually, her escape had come to its end. Her feet could run no longer, and all she could hear were the booming footsteps that approached.

"This is your end!"

"Gwaaaaaaah!" Mia leaped from her bed with a shout, a far cry from what was suitable for an elegant midday's rest.

"Milady! Is something the matter?" Shocked, Anne approached.

Mia sighed. "Oh... Anne..." With that, the strength left her body, and she collapsed onto the bed. "It's you... So that was all just a dream..."

"A dream?" She gasped, pressing her palm against her lips. "Was it about the Serpents' castle?"

Anne was scowling, but Mia rushed to dismiss her fear with a shake of her head. "Oh, no. It wasn't that..."

Still, the frown did not leave Anne's face. Her worry remained unchanged.

Hm... This is quite the predicament.

Mia began to ponder. Explaining would be difficult, for the nightmare that haunted her was not of the Chaos Serpents, but of the revolution.

This really is quite odd. Just why am I dreaming about being caught by the revolutionaries again...?

It would be perfectly natural for visions of the Chaos Serpents' castle to haunt her dreams. The events that had transpired there had been quite the shock to Mia—for a whole few days, she was left unable to enjoy the taste of her food.

But to Mia, that was all in the distant past too. She had always been aware of who Bel truly was. If she let it affect her appetite, it could have negative effects on the yet-unborn Bel. In fact, she instead took to the motto of "I'll just have to eat Bel's share too!" while stuffing twice the number of cakes into her mouth. Of course, that received Anne's heavy remonstration. Mia's personal maid was the loyalest of retainers, ready to bravely advise of anything with no fear for her master's displeasure.

In any case, Mia's underhanded ploy had been squashed, but Bel's unfortunate demise still weighed heavily on Mia's soul. It was only natural it earned her a nightmare or two. But the nightmares she had been having lately were...of a different breed. Fears of revolution should be far behind her, and yet, horrid dreams of such events had returned. And the end of Tearmoon she now saw was *not* the one she had remembered—it was absolutely inexplicable.

Could it be because the revolution is approaching?

The time of the Empire's collapse in the previous timeline was nigh. Mia would be turning sixteen this winter, leaving only two years until she had fallen into the hands of the revolutionaries.

Perhaps I've just grown anxious. My heart is of quite a delicate constitution. Perhaps I should have some sweets to get my mind off things... To keep myself healthy, that is.

Chicken-hearted (delicate) Mia knew how to take care of herself. She hopped out of bed and headed for the dining hall.

"My, is that...?"

There, she found a familiar face; it was the daughter of one of the Four Dukes, Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon. She stood alone and forlorn. Mia gazed into her saddened face and found...some whipped cream on her lip! Mia

was flabbergasted. Taking a closer look, she found a whole *three* plates of cake laid out before the young girl.

She must be trying to eat away her sadness. It's a tried-and-true method, but...it's also a double-edged sword. I don't want to even consider the consequences of eating too much.

Mia calmly approached. Then, she grabbed her forearms.

"Eek! Huh?! Y-Your Highness...?"

Citrina leaped into the air. Mia was frozen in shock. She squeezed at her *own* forearms.

"How odd. Just what would explain this...? Are we of different construction?" Mia muttered, returning her gaze to Citrina's face.

"Um...?" Citrina looked utterly confused. Mia measured the whipped cream stuck to Citrina's face against the plates before her and sighed.

This is quite a serious case...

The shock of losing Bel was about to have Citrina falling head-first into the world of F.A.T. There was clearly more than what met the eye to Bel's disappearance; perhaps that very fact was what had Citrina stopping in her tracks.

In any case, I won't be able to face Bel once she's born should this put a damper on Citrina's health. But just what should I do...?

This dilemma had no clear solution. Any exercise activities that Mia could invite her to participate in like horseback riding or dancing were fraught with memories of Bel. Was there really nothing else?

I could ask Esmeralda to take us swimming, but it would be too cold this time of year. I suppose I could invite her during the summer, but something sooner would really be— Oh! I got it!

Mia clapped her hands together. "Rina, I was hoping to write my campaign pledges later. Would you perhaps be willing to help me?"

If moving her *body* wasn't feasible, Mia would expend her energy by moving her *brain*. This was Mia's Medical Method. Sweets only needed to be balanced by brain power. As long as you were working your brain, you could eat anything! (At least, in Mia's world.)

Besides, in times of trouble, it was best to distract yourself. There were plenty of problems that time could solve as long as you kept yourself preoccupied.

Citrina didn't seem all too thrilled at Mia's suggestion, but she nodded.

“No, Rina wouldn’t mind. I should meet you in the library, correct?”

“Yes, but there’s no need to hurry. I’m planning to head over once I have something sweet to eat myself. Hm... Why don’t you take the time to wake yourself up with a bath first? Then you can come meet me.” Mia wiped the cream from Citrina’s face with a handkerchief as she spoke.

“Oh... Thank you, Your Highness.” Citrina’s cheeks glowed a bashful red.

“Oho! This isn’t the Rina I know. You’d be hearing a mouthful if Esmeralda caught you acting like this.”

After their brief exchange, Mia stuffed her face with saccharine delights before heading to the library.

Chapter 1: Reunion

We return ourselves to the library, immediately following the emotional reunion of Bel and Mia.

"...Hwah?" was all that Mia could squeak out.

Bel, instead, could only curiously stare at the girl that stood beside her. "Did she come with me? I've never heard of something like that before, and I don't think I've ever seen this girl before either. Who is she?"

The girl in question simply looked around the room with a blank expressionless stare.

"Hmph..." Mia groaned as she watched the pair. "Well, so be it. In any case..." She composed herself and grinned. "I'm glad we've been able to meet again, Bel."

That was what was most important. Mia had thought it would be a long while before their reunion, and thus, all that mattered was that she was before her right now. Of course, there was a mysterious girl standing beside her for some inexplicable reason, but that was the small stuff. Mia wouldn't sweat the small stuff.

"You seem to be doing well! Based on that dress, I assume the Empire is stable?" asked Mia. Bel's gown was of the highest quality, and it appeared to shine.

"Oh, yes! This fabric was made by the Tailor's Guild to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of your birth! It's called 'Beautiful Mia-Sage Skin.'"

"I-I see..." With a forced smile, Mia appraised the silky surface of Bel's dress.

Hmph... Well, I guess it does shine as much as my skin. Anne has been taking excellent care of it, after all. But...is the Tearmoon Empire of the future okay...? Just this alone is enough to have me worried...

Lamenting that no one had come out to put a stop to the name, Mia got back to business. "Well in any case, it seems like we have much to discuss."

"About the Beautiful Mia-Sage Skin?"

“No. About what exactly brought you back here and who the girl with you is. But where would be a good place to take our time and...?”

“Hello?” A voice suddenly called out and the door to the library creaked open, revealing a sweet young girl at its entrance.

“Oh, moons...” Mia knew exactly who that voice must be, and it sent her into a panic. Should *she* discover that Bel had returned, there was no hope for a long chat. But at the same time, Mia thought it would be crude of her to prevent their meeting. Lost in this dilemma, Mia failed to react in time. Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon had already shuffled her way into the library.

“Oh, so this is where you were, Your Highness. I came to help you prepare for the student council elect—”

Citrina had been calm and composed when she entered the room, but her voice suddenly could no longer escape her. In her hand was a piece of parchment probably made in preparation to aid Mia, and it fell to the floor with a crumple.

Bel gasped. The sight of Citrina had her frozen as well. But then, she forced an awkward smile. “R-Rina, um... I’m back! And um...I’m sorry for making you so worried...”

Bel’s mumbling made her words sound like excuses, but Citrina stood completely still, until she suddenly took a step forward. Then another, then another, then another. As if the dam had burst over, she rushed into Bel’s arms, embracing her in a full-force tackle.

“Eek!”

The two fell to the floor. Citrina grabbed Bel’s cheeks and took a close look at her. Then, she timidly brushed her fingers over Bel’s neck.

“Hwah! R-Rina! S-Stop it! Aha ha ha! That tickles!” Bel flailed around on the floor with an immodest squeal, yet it was not enough to halt Citrina’s fingers.

“There’s not even a scar...” she muttered before returning her eyes to Bel’s. “Are... Are you a fake? Have the Serpents sent someone that looks just like my friend to trick Rina? Or maybe, Rina just misses you so much that I’m hallucinating...”

“Rina...” Faced with Citrina’s obvious confusion, Bel could only respond with a pained smile. “Um, it might be hard for you to believe, but I’m not a fake! And I’m not an illusion! I’m... I’m your friend, Bel. I’m back.”

Bel reached into her breast pocket, pulling out an object that elicited a gasp from Citrina—it was a timeworn troya. Suddenly, the girl whimpered, and then she began to sob, biting her lip in an attempt to hold back her tears. However, the relief and joy of their reunion had obliterated her self-control. Her long eyelashes began to tremble, and big round teardrops began to appear in her lovely eyes. As they multiplied, they slid from the corners of her eyes down her cheeks and fell to the floor with no end to stopping in sight.

"I'm back, Rina... Eek!"

Still unable to speak, Citrina squeezed her arms around Bel's neck. "Bel... Bel!" she sobbed. She clung to Bel like a crying child clinging to its mother. Her immortal facade of the perfect noble lady fell away, leaving in its place a simple young girl.

Bel put her arms around Citrina as well, gently stroking her hair as she whispered, "I'm sorry for making you worry so much, Rina..."

The two stood just like that until Citrina's tears had dried.

Chapter 2: Your Name?

My... I'm glad for them.

Mia's grandmotherly eyes were calm as she watched over the reunion between her granddaughter and her best friend. She had been deeply concerned about Citrina, but it seemed that friendship trumped all.

Now she can hear everything directly from Bel! Surely, that will get her back on her feet...

For a long while, Citrina simply clung to Bel. Once she had finally calmed down, she pulled slightly away and stared into Bel's eyes. "Bel, what's happening? An arrow shot you, and then you disappeared, didn't you? Maybe you really are an angel..."

"...An angel?" Bel gave Mia a confused glance.

"Yes, um... Your disappearance was a bit...*y'know*...so that is how Rina explained it—that you were an angel returning to heaven..."

"I see." For a moment, Bel was silent. Then, she turned to Citrina. "Um, Rina? Do you remember the promise we made?"

"The promise...?"

"That I would tell you my secret once we got back to Lunatear."

Citrina gasped. That promise had become her deepest desire, yet one she believed would never be fulfilled...

"Um, I'll tell you now! You see, I—" Before Bel could notice, Citrina had grabbed her arm and begun to pull her away.

"Huh? Rina?" asked Mia.

"Your Highness, Rina begs of you. It may be presumptuous of me, but I will be borrowing Bel." With that, she gave a kowtow and hauled Bel away. It seemed that she was all for hearing Bel's secret, but only if the two were alone.

"She begs of me? I don't believe Bel even started talking..." she muttered. "I could never refuse that request anyway..."

Mia had offered to share Bel's secret herself, yet Citrina had refused, standing strong against her deep wish to know more about her lost friend in

order to keep the promise they had made. Now that it was finally time, it was only natural Citrina would want the moment shared between just the two of them, and to Mia, she deserved as much. Tearmoon's princess was not so uncouth as to get in the way of Citrina's wholehearted friendship; she was a lady of class.

"But moons... It seems Bel will be occupied for quite a while. Which means..." Mia's interest naturally turned to the mysterious girl beside her. "I'd love for someone to explain things to me, but... Hmph..."

Once again, Mia examined the girl. She looked blankly at Mia, her thoughts completely concealed. Her irises shined the same blue as Bel's, yet their shape more closely resembled Mia's.

Her almond eyes look quite a bit like mine, so I assume we're closely related...

Suddenly, Mia felt that something was *off*.

Did she really think nothing of the conversation between Bel and Rina?

Their talk probably sounded like nonsense to any outsiders—like something that would undoubtedly pique anyone's curiosity.

What kid wouldn't get sucked into all this talk about being shot with arrows and angels?! That should have gotten her drawn in and asking questions yet...she seems absolutely unfazed.

Some may say she was just a girl of utmost discipline, but Mia couldn't help but find it a bit unsettling. Her face lacked expression, making it look like a doll's. To Mia, it was a tad creepy.

"Um, anyways...could you share your name? Mine is Mia..."

Mia wanted to avoid putting the young girl into a panic. Thus, she refrained from sharing her full name. Then, she bent down to look straight into the girl's eyes. For a moment, their eyes locked, but the girl quickly averted her gaze.

Huh? She's not saying anything. For a moment, Mia didn't like where this was going. Or rather, it was more of an eternity, because Mia couldn't even *imagine* this going well. *Moons... Is she not sharing her name because...it's* embarrassing*?*

Mia, at her core, did not trust her future self. This was predicated, of course, on her previous offense, the name "Miabel." Every muscle in her body quaked in fear of what "Mia-name" this girl could have.

I wasn't necessarily the one who named her, but...the chances of her

having a strange name aren't exactly low. But just what is it?

She might have been afraid to hear the name, but not knowing would only cause future trouble down the road. Names could also be a source of information.

Just what can I do...?

Then Mia heard...a grumble! It was so meager, so cutesy, and so undeniably the sound of a hungry stomach. She immediately put a hand to her stomach—"she," of course, being Mia. How absurd, considering the sweets she had eaten just moments earlier.

But then, the truth came to her—it had not been her own stomach that had grumbled.

"My, was that you?" She peered into the girl's eyes. For the first time, she found the remnants of an expression on her countenance, for her cheeks were dyed pink. "I see you're hungry. Why don't we chat over some tasty snacks?"

Finally seeing a hint of the childishness that should be on her face, Mia had found some relief.

Chapter 3: The Promised Time Has Come and What Resounds Is...a Scream?

Citrina led Bel into her room and sat her on her bed. Then, she grabbed a chair for herself and brought it over, placing it in front of Bel so the two could face each other. When she sat, their knees touched, and for a moment, she only stared into Bel's eyes. Then, she sighed.

"You really are Bel..."

"I am... I'm sorry for making you worry all this time, Rina." She bowed her head in apology.

"No, Rina's sorry for what happened back then too. And..." She squeezed Bel's hands. "Thank you for saving me. Rina always wanted to apologize, but...I couldn't...and I couldn't stand it..." Tears once again appeared in her eyes. Her shoulders shook with sobs, and Bel waited silently for her to finish.

"Rina, I'm going to keep my promise now." She looked straight into Citrina's eyes. "My name is Miabel. Miabel Luna Tearmoon."

"...Luna Tearmoon? That makes you..."

Bel met Citrina's disbelief with a shake of her head that was the absolute embodiment of seriousness. "No, I'm not Miss Mia's younger sister. I'm Miss Mia's—*Grandmother Mia's*—granddaughter. I came from the future."

"Her granddaughter? From the future...?"

Once again, Bel took the same object from her dress's bosom. Wizened as it was, the dilapidated object was undeniably *the* troya. For a moment, Citrina only looked confused. Then, she stood up and opened one of the drawers in her desk. Inside were two small horse-shaped charms.

"I heard that you held on to it for all this time, patiently waiting for the day I was born so you could return it to me." Bel gave her a worried look. "Will you believe me?"

Citrina, on the other hand, just looked confused. "Why do you ask? Of course Rina will believe you. I would never doubt anything that came from

you. Even if you told Rina you were an angel, I would believe it!" She gave a firm nod. "I think it actually explains some things. So, you're Her Highness's granddaughter... Does that mean in the future, we're like granddaughter and grandmother?"

Citrina was joking, but Bel instead gave her a complicated grin. "No, we aren't. Actually, you..."

Quietly, Bel began her tale of the fateful day she awoke on Mia's bed.

"There's so much to tell you—what happened after all that, where we're all heading now. But first..." Mia's smile was kind, but there was something weighing on Bel's mind.

"Um, Miss Mia? What happened to Rina?" She was desperate to know the fate of her best friend.

Mia was visibly shocked. "Oh... I see your memories haven't quite fallen together yet..." She glanced away. "You see, Rina..." she stumbled, clearly trying to spit out words that were hard to say.

This left Bel feeling...worried. Could Citrina be no longer...?

"Excuse me..." Suddenly the door opened, and a "girl" appeared. "Is Bel here, Your Majesty? We had plans for a tea party today..."

Yes, it was an adorable young *girl* that appeared. Her hair was as brilliant as wildflowers, swaying back and forth with each step of her tiny body, and she was undeniably Bel's most precious friend.

"Ri...na?" Bel muttered before immediately denying the possibility. Citrina was a year younger than Mia, yet the girl before her looked no older than her mid-teens. Her hair held a brilliant shine, and her skin had the plumpness of adolescence. So, just who was this girl who looked to be Citrina's doppelgänger?

"Are you Rina's daughter? No, granddaughter?" Bel was once again assaulted with worry. Why was it that she had forged a friendship with the girl before her and not Rina herself? Why was her best friend not to be present at this tea party? She recalled Mia's earlier pained expression. "Is Rina not...not...?" Tears blurred her eyes as she began to sniffle.

"Oh, Bel... Just take a second to look back into your past. I think you'll find the answer as to just what became of Rina." Mia's expression was as complex and hard to read as it had been earlier.

Bel tried to do just what she was told, opening the lid on the box that

was her memories.

"...Huh?" Now Bel was *really* lost. In each of its junctures was a Citrina that looked exactly like the girl now before her—at her fifth birthday, at their various tea parties, at the birthday festival of Mia's that served as Bel's debut in high society. In each and every event she could recall, Citrina was right there beside her, exactly as she had appeared back when they had first met. "*Huh?* Are... Are you Rina?"

Seeing Bel's confusion, Citrina could only cast Mia a curious glance. "Um, Your Majesty? Is something wrong with Bel?"

"Yes, sort of. It seems like she's gotten her memories back. You know, of everything that happened before what took place at the Serpents' castle..."

Citrina gasped, clasping her hands over her mouth. She approached Bel, pulling her close to her chest. "Welcome home, Bel... Rina's waited so long for you..."

"Rina... It really is you!" The reality had finally hit Bel, but it left her with an obvious question. "But why haven't you aged at all?"

Yes, that was the *real* question. From what Bel could tell, Citrina was still in her teen years, a complete mismatch to the age she *should* be.

This had Citrina giggling. "Tee hee! Rina's flattered, but I *have* aged! I'm a proper granny now! I even have grandkids the age that you are. Take a closer look. Do you see the wrinkles?" She held out the palm of her hands, and while there were wrinkles...even *Bel* had so many. There was something obviously strange about Citrina's current appearance.

In need of Mia's help, Bel looked toward her. She shrugged, exasperated. "It seems that this is the result of the Yellowmoons' full forces. She's been using her knowledge of medicinal plants to preserve her youth, or something... I don't quite believe in magic or witches, but I sometimes secretly wonder if Citrina could actually be one..."

Citrina responded with a sweet smile. "My, but this is nothing, Your Majesty. Rina's only doing all she can to stay as Bel's friend." She then turned to the friend in question. "Bel, you see, Rina's been doing her best to stay young so we can stay friends. There were times when I was busy, but my children have all grown up, and Rina's relinquished everything to her heir. Now, I can spend all my time with you without a single worry."

"Rina..." Bel had almost let herself be moved by this deeply Citrina-like

display of friendship before a thought occurred to her. “Um, is your husband okay with this?”

“Tee hee! It’s fine! The only thing he cares about is his sword anyway. It lets Rina be free. He might even accompany us as a guard if we ever go out to play together.”

For some reason, this talk of Citrina’s husband had Bel seeing a menace in her friend for the first time. For a moment, she was slightly worried about Citrina’s partner, but then...she remembered who he was.

Oh! I don’t have to worry about him!

In fact, as far as Bel knew, he was the most trustworthy person in the whole world.

“So, Bel, it’s okay to live a long, long time. Since Rina’s about 40 years older than you, I’ll be 140 when you reach 100, but I’ll stick it out as your friend for the whole time.” Citrina’s smile grew mischievous. “That age difference is nothing! We’ll be able to be good friends despite our age gap, right?”

What a thing to say.

“...So basically, the two of us aren’t like grandmother and granddaughter, but like two normal friends!”

“I see,” said Citrina with a meek nod. “Yup... If Rina knew you had come from the future...I think I really would do that. It really does make sense...” Her nods grew affirmative. “Anyway, Bel, there’s something I’m reeeally curious about.”

“What is it?” Bel beamed.

“Who does Rina marry? Your story made Rina really curious—or, well, perhaps I’m just worried...”

“Hm... I can’t tell you that, but...” Bel hung her head in thought. “But don’t worry! You two are super lovey-dovey! Just the other day, I saw—”

An indescribable scream reverberated through the room.

Chapter 4: Scruples Firmer than a Dried Mushroom

Mia led the mysterious girl to the dining hall, shocking a worker who had just seen Mia there moments earlier.

“Your Highness, you’re not...back to eat more, are you?!”

“Huh? Of course I’m not,” Mia said with a laugh, finding the suggestion preposterous. Even Mia wouldn’t dream of downing more sweets given all she had eaten earlier—she simply did not have the room for it. In fact, there was little room for much of anything in Mia, physically or mentally. Plus, there was the fact that Anne was on quite good terms with the dining hall’s staff. Should Mia eat too much, it would make its way back to Anne’s ears and earn her a scolding. And of course, the dress Bel had been wearing earlier played a part as well.

Tatiana told me that overindulging in sweets is the skin’s mortal enemy! I need to show restraint here for the sake of Tearmoon’s future industries. That cloth needs to be material of utmost quality!

Mia knew that the quality assurance of Tearmoon’s future products were all resting on her very shoulders. She made her dire resolve with complete awareness. She suggested...

“Actually, I came for some tea. But could you get this girl something to eat too? Hm... Um, kid? Have you had lunch yet?”

The girl looked at Mia with a tilt of her slender neck. “Why?”

“Well, if you haven’t eaten yet, I was going to order you a meal. And if you had, I was going to get you some cake... Ah, but wait! If you haven’t had a meal yet, you shouldn’t lie just so you can get straight to dessert. If you skip your meals and only eat sweets, you won’t grow up to be an upstanding adult.”

Mia desperately tried to send a message to her granddaughter(?) that had once been instilled upon her. She was the envy of grandmothers everywhere.

The girl, instead, simply looked confused. “I haven’t...eaten...”

“My, in that case, I’ll order you my favorite full-course meal. Hm...” She glanced over to the kitchen staff member, who hung her head in embarrassment.

“Our deepest apologies, Your Highness. We ran out of the required ingredients just moments earlier...”

“Ah...yes, that’s right.”

She now remembered that the island of Saint-Noel had been in a state of emergency as of late. Just three days earlier, an uncharacteristic spring storm had assaulted the Holy Principality of Belluga, and while that itself passed quickly, its large scope and strong winds had left Noelige Lake with rough waters. As a result, even the most seasoned of sailors had qualms about traversing the lake, cutting the whole island off from the rest of the world.

Luckily, the island had proper stockpiles, but the academy’s dining hall had not escaped the storm’s effects—the menu had experienced some cuts.

“What’s available right now?”

“Well, all we can make now is Belluga mushroom stew...”

While the kitchen staff looked completely down in the dumps, Mia was beaming. “Oho! That would be perfect. I could eat that all week!”

Belluga mushroom stew was a delicacy among delicacies. Smooth cream combined with the sweet bite of mushrooms into a dish that was easily ranked in the top ten of foods Mia wanted at her last meal.

I’m sure this girl will love it too!

Mia looked at her with a joyful grin, but the girl still appeared as confused as she had been earlier. “You are going to feed me?”

“Of course I am! Oh, but...” Mia put on a mischievous grin. “That’s only if you tell me your name,” she joked.

The girl took a moment to ponder the proposition. Then, she nodded. “It’s Patricia...” she muttered.

Mia opened her eyes. “My! That’s a perfectly proper name!” She had been so certain the girl had been given one of the strange Mia-names that her future self seemed to be drawn to that the completely normal name left her in absolute shock.

She crossed her arms and took a moment to think. *So, she must have been named after my grandmother...*

Patricia Luna Tearmoon was the name of Mia's grandmother, the current emperor's mother.

Naming her after my grandmother who I've never even met... This is too *proper. It's absolutely textbook!*

The amount of trust Mia had in her future self was infinitesimal. Thus, she couldn't help but feel like there was something off about this name.

It's too *textbook!*

Naming a new princess after one of her ancestors was completely commonplace. Could Mia have really come up with such a proper name? Mia, at least, had some serious doubt.

Well, I wasn't necessarily the one who named her, but...

It left her with some scruples.

Did this girl really come with Bel? Is she really my...grandchild?

Bel had said that she had no idea who this girl was. Given that Bel could be quite the airhead, this didn't really ring any alarm bells for Mia, but...

Something here really isn't quite right. I need to proceed with caution.

Mia's scruples were strong, buttressed by the faith in her intuition she had forged through making it out of countless dangerous situations alive, and her absolute lack of faith when it came to her future self. She put herself on guard and looked at Patricia when...

Her nose began to twitch. "Ah... What an amazing aroma..." The staff were currently bringing the stew to their table. "Well, let's think about the hard stuff later. First up is a proper meal. You should know that Belluga mushroom stew is one of the finest foods in the continent!" Mia boastfully explained the dish to Patricia, who didn't look all too thrilled. "Huh? Is something the matter?"

Patricia grumpily pushed the stew around with her fork. "This is...yucky."

Mia was...

"Hwaaaaaah?!"

...completely taken aback. What Patricia was pushing toward the side of her plate was the dish's main hero!

"Y-Y-You hate...*mushrooms*?"

Bam! The force of this realization hit Mia like a ton of bricks. Her lips trembled in shock.

I-Is that even possible?! My *grandchild? Hating* mushrooms*? Really?*

Obviously, it was very possible. Tastes are unique to each individual. Thus, there should be nothing strange about Mia's grandchild not sharing her tastes. Yet...

Something really is strange here. Mia's sixth sense as Empress Mushroom was trying to tell her something. *Never mind her name, this really is mysterious...*

She would never shy away from the chance to share her favorite foods with her grandchildren! Mia was magnanimous, the kind of person who would share her favorite stories with those around her—the kind of person who believed that tasty food was to be shared. Was it really possible that *her* grandchild could hate mushrooms?

The mushroom dishes prepared by the chef in the Whitemoon Palace are absolute delicacies! Anyone who has had the chance to try them would be enchanted. Thus, her hatred of mushrooms must be because she's never even tried them...

Mia nodded with resolve. "That's impossible. No, someone who shares my blood hating mushrooms is absolutely impossible in and of itself. Which means...this girl...!"

This was fishy! *Waaay* too fishy! Mia's resolve was stronger than iron, steel, and yes...even dried mushrooms.

Mia gasped as she watched Patricia put a spoonful in her mouth. She must have surmised that it would be rude for her to turn down the food. Gingerly, fearfully, Patricia took her first bite.

"This is good..." she whispered. Red dyed her young cheeks, and a smile appeared on her lips. "This is really good! These mushrooms are really yummy!"

Mia grinned. "Aren't they?!"

Yes, she grinned! Her hardened scruples and resolve softened like a dried mushroom in boiling water.

Well, Mia's resolve had never amounted to very much anyway...

Chapter 5: A Serpent's Shadow

Mia gave a satisfied nod as she watched Patricia wordlessly eat her mushroom stew.

Oho! She seems to have quite an appetite. It's starting to make me hungry as well...

Mia rubbed her stomach...then turned her gaze to those around her. Noticing, the kitchen staff rushed over with some tea.

"Here, Your Highness. This is our special milk tea."

"My, thank you! I was hoping I could get some snacks to pair with this..."

"Our ingredients are not... Plus, it would anger Anne."

Her frankness had Mia groaning. This particular staff member was one Mia was acquainted with, and she had quite a close relationship with Anne. Mia's actions had been leaked to her—a gear (Mia) shift orchestrated perfectly by Anne. Her ceaseless efforts acted as permanent protection of Mia's health.

Well, there's nothing I can do about that... Judging by how much Patricia's gobbling these mushrooms down, she really must have never eaten them before. Which means...

Mia's curiosity got the best of her. "Um, why did you say you hated mushrooms?"

Patricia continued to stare at her plate. "My tummy hurts...when I eat them..." she whispered.

Mia...understood her point of view entirely!

Oh, I get it! Eating poisonous mushrooms does lead to stomachaches. She must have a scar over her heart left from making that mistake...

Mia was charmed. But then, she found some stew plastered to Patricia's cheek.

"Oh, dear..." Mia wiped it off with a kind smile. She was the kindest of kind grandmothers, but Patricia's reaction was a bit unexpected.

"Ah! I-I-I'm sorry..." She shivered in fear.

Again, Mia felt that something was off. “It’s nothing to apologize for. A lady really shouldn’t get food on her face, but tasty mushrooms are enough to get in the way of anyone’s composure.”

For some reason, Patricia stared at her in shock. Then, she opened her mouth in trepidation. “Um...why are you giving me tasty food?”

“Why? Well, if you’re going to eat something, it’s best if it’s tasty, right? Whether you be a noble or an imperial princess, that goes for anybody.”

Mia spoke an unwavering truth—if you’re gonna eat, it better be tasty.

“I see.” Patricia seemed to have come to an understanding. She gave a quiet nod. “You’re saying that gluttony is one way to ruin Tearmoon’s imperial household...”

“Oho! Exact— Huh?” Patricia’s praise of the mushroom stew had set Mia into cheerful laughter, but her grin suddenly froze.

...“Ruin the imperial household”?! Huh?

“*The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth* says that gluttony leads to wasted expenditure.”

The shocking vocabulary that was flying out of Patricia’s mouth had Mia flabbergasted.

*Th-Th-*The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*?! I-Is this kid with the Serpents?!*

Mia was about to fly off the back of her chair, but she managed to hang on to her last bit of composure. It took every effort to organize her chaotic thoughts, and she forced a smile.

I-I can’t let her find out I’m the Tearmoon Princess. She’s got to be quite dense not to have figured it out when I shared my name earlier, but...I can’t let my guard down! I’ve got to hurry and get a handle on this situation. For now, I need to meet up with Bel and...

Mia gulped...her tea, that is. It got her emotions under control.

“Um, so...are you a teacher of House Clausius, Miss Mia?”

House Clausius? Hm... I feel like I’ve heard that name before...

Mia tilted her head as she began to think. Now, this may be easy to forget, but Mia was in fact the princess of the Tearmoon Empire. Due to Ludwig’s unflappable efforts, the names of almost all of Tearmoon’s noble families were stored in her head, surprising as that may be. But oddly, while the name did ring a bell, she couldn’t quite remember who they could be. It tugged at her brain.

Ugh... Just who were they again?

"Um...?" Patricia flashed her a look of doubt.

"O-Oh, um..."

Just how should she answer? Patricia seemed to be under the belief that Mia was a teacher of Chaos Serpent ways. She could try using the misunderstanding to her advantage, but given that she just revealed her name, it wouldn't be long until that plan fell through.

Just how should she answer the young Patricia?

...Patricia?

Oh! I've got it! Mia's realization brought her back from the brink of death.

"Yes, I am a tutor for House Clausius, and I plan to have all of my lessons stick. Please treat me as if I were Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon."

"Princess...? Hm? But..."

Mia tried to wipe away Patricia's confusion with a smile. "This is training. A practice drill."

Yes...Mia would declare this training, claiming her name to be false just as the girl before her had used her grandmother's name to pretend to be of her blood.

I was foolish to give her my name early, but this should be enough to fool her. Mia began to rack her brain. *But just what is happening here? If this girl was sent here by the Serpents, then what is their goal? Did this girl really come from the future with Bel? Have the Serpents learned how to interfere with time travel? And just how did Bel get back here in the first place anyway?*

As the steam of a hard think began to seep from her ears, Mia took Patricia away from the dining hall to meet up again with Bel.

Chapter 6: The Loyal Retainer Is a Contrarian

The third room on the second floor of the girls' dormitory at Saint-Noel Academy was built like any other, but all who lived there knew it to be the layer of the school's ruler. In other words, it was the room of Rafina Orca Belluga. In front of it now stood a girl who sighed—Lynsha.

I still can't get used to being here.

She knocked on the door.

"Excuse me, Lady Rafina."

"My, Lynsha. Please, come in."

Having been granted permission, she pushed the door open. Rafina had come to greet her, but her expression was worn. Dark circles had started to appear under her eyes.

I suppose she hasn't been able to escape it either...

Lynsha had been worked to the bone over the last few days. Just the memory had another sigh escaping her lips. The spring storm that had assaulted Belluga had kept Rafina up and working with little sleep. To further rub salt into the wound, Rafina's maid Monica had left the island just before the storm had hit.

While the weather was usually a bit unstable around this time of year, storms like this one were rare. The unexpected circumstances had left Santeri, the man in charge of the island's security, swamped.

Princess Mia may be the student council president, but the details of the island's workings are all left to Belluga. It must be tough on Rafina.

Lynsha's thoughts were suddenly cut off.

"I'm deeply sorry for pushing you around like this," said Rafina. "These circumstances really are atypical..."

Lynsha's response was a forced smile.

"So? Have you grown used to working for the academy?" Rafina, too, forced a smile, trying to hide her exhaustion.

“Yes, thanks to your efforts,” Lynsha responded curtly.

“Are you pushing yourself too ha—? No, never mind that.” This time, Rafina’s smile was considerate, but she cut herself off with a shake of her head. It reminded Lynsha that Rafina wasn’t a noble who suffered from the affliction of hubris.

“Are you pushing yourself too hard?” was a question of consideration, but it could also be cruel. When asked to those who are already hurt, it instead pushes them further into a corner, for “No, I’m not” is never a truthful answer. When someone is pained but needs to push on forward, they instead push themselves *too* hard, pretending that everything is all right. Asking such a person “Are you pushing yourself too hard?” had an obvious answer, and it was one that should not be asked. *This* was the reason Rafina had cut herself off.

And yet...

“I’m not pushing myself at all. There is much I’ve learned at the academy. There’s no need for you to concern yourself over me,” declared Lynsha with a smile.

I’m not hurting, after all.

It had been sudden.

After returning to Remno and greeting her old revolutionary friends, Lynsha had decided to take an excursion to visit her brother Lambert, who was currently in another country (it seemed that he had begun teaching literature at a school run by the Central Orthodox Church, a job which he quite enjoyed). Afterward, Lynsha had returned to Saint-Noel.

Has she really been studying during all the time I’ve been away? I doubt it. I’ve got to make sure I give her a mouthful...

It was with those thoughts in her mind that she returned to the academy. But sad news had shortly greeted her.

“I’m sorry, Lynsha. Bel is no longer...”

The girl was gone. *Gone*. The phrasing had been indirect, but Lynsha wasn’t enough of a fool not to have grasped its meaning. Bel...had died. Just like that, she had left this world, and Lynsha had been none the wiser. It left her...absolutely pissed off. She wasn’t really sad—not at all, really. It was just that whenever the thought, *But I went through all the trouble of saving you! How could you just die like that...?* flit through her head, tears of

frustration welled up in her eyes.

That, she insisted, was the only reason for her tears.

“So, Lynsha... Do you intend to stay in Saint-Noel?” asked Mia.

“What do you mean?” Lynsha lowered her voice, surely to keep the anger out of it.

“You treated Bel quite kindly. I’m not very fond of the idea of firing you, and I think you could learn a lot here that could help you in the future. I had a chat with Miss Rafina, and she agreed that one path for you would be to stay at Saint-Noel as *her* maid as you continued your studies.”

“As the Holy Lady’s maid?”

“Yes. I’m sure you remember Barbara and Jem.”

Of course she did. How could she forget? One was the woman she defeated with her own hands, and the other was the conman who had deceived her brother.

“There are quite a few people like them hiding around us. Thus, we’re very lucky to have someone like you who we can rely on.”

The words Mia offered were mere sympathy. She was the younger sister of the Remno Revolution’s mastermind. That title was one that weighed heavily on her. Living from here on out in Remno would be suffocating, but at the same time, she had not been blessed with enough talents to live abroad. Should she remain at Saint-Noel to study while serving as a maid to Rafina, she might eventually earn the right to become one of her official retainers. Or she could use the knowledge she gained at Saint-Noel as a merchant.

But more than anything, she felt that refusing such a proposal would mean admitting that there were scars in her heart that could not heal...that the death of Bel had hurt her.

And so she accepted. “Thank you. That would help me immensely.”

It would be strange to refuse. This would be for her own benefit.

The death of the girl had not hurt her, nor had it caused her sorrow.

Thus, Lynsha found herself working under Rafina...and with quite a bit of free time. Bel didn’t require too much looking after, but she now found herself with even less work. This was all thanks to the kindness of Mia and Rafina who were trying to assure she would have time to study, but it instead had left Lynsha feeling quite bored. She felt empty, as if there were

a hole somewhere in her heart. So, being swamped with the work needed to respond to the storm was something Lynsha instead felt grateful for.

"So? What is it?"

Rafina's question had brought Lynsha out of her thoughts. "Oh, um... There is a report from Monica. It seems Barbara has escaped..."

Rafina's shoulders jumped at the news. "...Was that because someone let her free?" she muttered, crossing her arms.

"According to the report...it has only been ten days since her escape. We are only hearing of it now because the storm slowed our communications."

"I see..." Rafina sighed. "She may be planning to make contact with the High Priestess...Princess Valentina. We may need to strengthen our defenses..." She gave an exasperated shake of her head.

Having made her report, Lynsha headed back to her room.

"I think I have arithmetic tomorrow... I'll need that if I want to be a merchant. I'll have to give it my all." That led Lynsha to thinking about how much Bel hated that class, and it put a bitter smile on her lips. "Well, I guess not having to teach her arithmetic has saved me the effort. She hated studying."

She wasn't sad; she had just lost one more thing to consider.

She sighed. "I haven't thought about her in a while. It's pissing me off again..."

Despite having once been a noble, unladylike words overflowed from her mouth. But that was just an irrefutable consequence of what she had been through. No matter how many times she had told Bel not to show her thanks with coins, it was thanks to Bel that she could continue to study here at Saint-Noel. She felt like it was a parting gift to her, one more "thank you"...and it pissed her off above all imagination.

"What am I getting so angry about? This is completely irrelevant."

Bel was almost nothing to her. They had only been acquainted for a year, and she had only become the girl's retainer in the first place because Mia had begged her to. Her loyalty was nothing, the price of just a few small coins...

But then, Lynsha picked her head up and looked in front of her. She gasped. Before her was the room of Duke Yellowmoon's daughter, and she could see the door opening. She knew this, and thus, there was nothing

strange about Bel's friend Citrina exiting it. However, while few smiles had graced Citrina ever since Bel's disappearance, she now looked to be in incredibly high spirits. It caught her attention. Listlessly, she stared at the door when she saw...*it*. The nostalgic face of a young girl.

"Ah..." she croaked, her voice wavering. But she wasn't happy. Her feet just broke into a run on their own accord. She thought nothing of their reunion. After all—*after all*—she was only angry at the girl, and nothing else.

"Ah! M-Mother Lynsha...I mean, Lynsha! Hwah?!"

She was simply irked that after leaving her for all this time, *that* was Bel's response, her voice as ditzy and nonchalant as always. Thus, in anger, she jumped on the girl.

"You've got to be kidding me! How could you just disappear like that?! Do you know how much I was worried about you?! I was so...so...!"

Words escaped her. Her vision began to blur, and tears began to seep from her eyes. Lynsha's attitude had been "who gives a damn!" but now, she exploded with all the feelings she had pent up, Bel the sole victim of the blast.

Chapter 7: All Is Revealed! Our Heroine's...Dignity?

Having left the dining hall, Mia now stood in front of Citrina's room in the girls' dormitory.

This is the only place she could have dragged her, but...

The door now in front of her, Mia had found some qualms—she couldn't help but feel bad about interrupting the buddy-buddy talks that must now be happening inside.

I feel like the consequences of interrupting Rina in the middle of such talks could be...disastrous.

Of course, Mia was certain she wouldn't be poisoned, but she couldn't help but feel sorry—and scared—about getting in the way of things after seeing how much Citrina had grieved Bel's loss. Still, this was no time to dillydally. Mia looked to Patricia—her doll-like face expressionless as she tilted her eyes up at Mia—and groaned.

If this girl is with the Serpents, there's got to be some kind of plot in the works. I don't think she's much of a threat by herself, but I can't let my guard down.

The Serpents operated by having small sparks turn into flames that could sweep entire nations. Things that looked harmless or inconsequential should still be met with caution. Thus, Mia let out a big sigh and made her resolve. She knocked on the door. However...!

"Huh? They must not be here."

Her knock got no response. She put her ear to the door, testing to see if she could hear anything inside. All was silent.

"I thought for sure they would be discussing things here. I wonder where they went..." Mia took a moment to reason things through. "I see... It would make sense if they headed into town. Anyone would want to walk around shopping and snacking after a reunion with a close friend. Plus, there's no better place for that than Saint-Noel!"

Mia thought back to the cream that had been stuck to Citrina's cheek in the dining hall. She, too, had descended from the same imperial family as Mia, and that was all the evidence Mia needed.

"In that case, we'll have to look for them."

Luckily, Mia was well-versed in all the best snacking spots the island had to offer—the Great Sage's information network was not to be underestimated.

"Um, Miss Mia? Where are we going?"

"We're heading to town. I believe it'll prove valuable to you to walk around Saint-Noel."

"Saint-Noel...? The island in the Holy Principality of Belluga?"

"Precisely. Um... Won't it be a great hands-on experience for learning how to be a Chaos Serpent?"

Patricia responded with an earnest nod.

A fierce wind greeted them as soon as they stepped outside the dormitory. A cute shriek reverberated throughout the air. Yes, you read that right—a *cute* shriek. Now an upperclassman, Mia had changed. She had learned the manners of a sweet princess fitting of being our adorable heroine. A sudden gust of wind now elicited a *cute* shriek from her...or did it?

"My? Are you all right, Patricia?" Mia asked, entirely nonchalant.

It seems that it was not *Mia* who had let out that shriek, but Patricia. You see, Mia had let out a gallant "Oho! What a strong wind!" the moment the gust blew by, both grinning and completely composed. Now an enjoyer of horse rides, Mia had become friends with the wind. Strong gusts were not enough to panic her...or perhaps a strange sense of dignity had moved her even further away from being an ideal heroine. Either or.

"Given these winds, they may not be able to sail across the lake for quite a while longer," surmised Mia, slightly worried. And the effects of that could be seen in the town. Unable to acquire wares, many shops had closed their windows, and the ones which remained open had limited menus.

You see, Mia knew everything when it came to Saint-Noel's sweets shops—the Great Sage's information network (on sweets) was not to be underestimated!

"Well, I doubt we'll run out of food completely...and if necessary, we

could eat the mushrooms in the forests."

Mia had experienced the Great Famine. Eating scavenged mushrooms for three days was a piece of cake to her—or in this case, a piece of mushroom.

I bet Belluga mushrooms grilled with some salt would be heavenly. It could actually be fun to have that with everyone!

In fact, Mia was even looking forward to the prospect. A seasoned warrior, Mia's stomach could turn troubles like this into tasty get-togethers.

"The storm should be keeping outsiders off the island, so it should be even safer than usual. We are in a hurry too, after all," she muttered, speed-walking toward town. There was strength in her every step, and negligence pushing her forward—she had no way of knowing the familiar enemy that would be awaiting her there.

Chapter 8: The Cursed House Clausius

"Hmph. So, they weren't here either..." Mia had visited three of the shops she could think of, but there were no traces of Citrina and Bel. "Could they still be in the dorms? They do say that the lucky blue mushroom grows not too far from your feet... This really is quite the dilemma."

"Miss Mia? Um..." Mia glanced to her side at Patricia, who was looking around with lights dazzling in her eyes. "What is that store?"

"Oh, that's the tailor. They have all the cutting-edge designs the continent has to offer."

"I've never seen a shop that sparkles so much."

"Huh? Have you never been to Lunatear?" Mia was puzzled. Saint-Noel *was* the origin for all of the continent's biggest fads, but Lunatear was full of shops like this too. Should she really have been so surprised?

"No, I've always lived in the capital city of the Clausius domain."

Mia chuckled.

Oho! What a mishap! She's pretending to be my granddaughter, and yet she says she's never been to Lunatear? No...she might not have come from the same place as Bel. Just because she appeared from that light doesn't necessarily mean she time traveled. So...maybe she's not *trying to pretend to be my granddaughter? Hmm...*

It would be way too much if what happened to Bel was occurring so frequently. Perhaps Patricia had just appeared with perfect timing and was entirely unrelated to Bel. At least, Mia had begun to consider that possibility.

The only hint I have is this "House Clausius." I definitely feel like I've heard of it somewhere before, but I can't quite put my finger on who they are...

After the harsh scoldings she had received from Ludwig in the previous timeline, Mia had made sure to remember all the names she needed to know. And as Tearmoon's princess, she had a good enough grasp of

Tearmoon's noble houses even before that. "Good enough" meaning the absolute minimum, but...

But *still*! She had no sense of this House Clausius at all.

Could they be a noble house from outside Tearmoon? That doesn't quite seem right either. Argh...

After all that thinking, Mia decided she needed to clear her doubts, and the path to that was quite simple.

"Um, Patricia, so Earl Clausius..."

Yes, she would figure out their rank! If she could have both their name and rank, Mia might be able to pull the house out of her memories. With that hope guiding her...

"Earl? Um, House Clausius are marquises."

...her expectations were completely upended.

"Marquesses...?" Mia was at a loss. The rank of marquis was rather high up in the hierarchy. Even *Mia* should be able to remember all their names, no doubt about it! Or maybe there were some doubts...yes, there definitely were...

Still, it was incredibly strange that Mia could not remember the name. *They must not be Tearmoon nobles then? But I really do feel like I recognize the name... Oh!*

Mia had a flash of inspiration.

Y-Yes...that's right! Marquis Clausius! I really have heard of them before!

In fact, of course Mia had heard of them. House Clausius...

...was the house of Grandmother Patricia—her maiden name from before she married my grandfather!

For a moment, Mia wanted to hold her head and scream. How could she forget the name of a house she was related to? While this mistake really was fatal, there was some room for sympathy, as Mia had never met a member of House Clausius. They had fallen before she was even born.

Plus, there was another reason Mia would want to rid herself of any memories of them.

That's right. The Cursed House Clausius... I haven't thought about them in a while.

"The Cursed House Clausius" was a ghost story that had traumatized Mia during her childhood. According to the tale, a monster would visit any

who shared the house's blood. It was an incredibly ill-natured fable.

Also, to be very clear—a misunderstanding would be horrendous—Mia was not afraid of curses or ghosts or anything of the sort. Not at all. So whenever she heard the story, she did not cover her ears, nor did she do anything to ensure she didn't hear it or that it didn't remain in her memories. Truthfully, she did not!

But anyways...the house of her grandmother had become a name she wanted to forget.

Which means, this girl isn't pretending to be my granddaughter, but my grandmother? Even for one of my enemies, she's been quite thorough with her research... Hm?

Suddenly, Mia once again felt like something was off...as if she was about to realize something important...

If she was going to pretend to be someone she's not, would she really pretend to be my grandmother? This is incredibly convoluted. Is there maybe a simpler answer?

Just as Mia was about to lose herself in her deductions, she was suddenly interrupted.

"My, Princess Mia. How lovely it is to see you."

Huh? Who is that?

Reflexively, Mia lifted her face. Perhaps she had lost herself *too* much in her thoughts, as somewhere down the line, the two had wandered into an empty alley. Except, that is, for a woman standing at its end.

"Huh?" All the energy escaped her, for what she saw was...

"Heh! To think we would meet in a place like this... I must send my thanks to Lady Luck."

...a woman with the twisted smile of a snake—Barbara.

Chapter 9: The Tearmoon Somersault Kick Bursts Forth...Not

"B-B-B-Barbara...what brings you here?"

If memory served Mia correctly, she should have been locked up somewhere in Belluga. Mia's voice shook in shock, but Barbara instead wore the smile of someone who had assured their victory.

"Well, it was a bit difficult, but the wind wasn't enough to stop me from sailing over. I knew a skilled sailor, you see. Plus, it is times like this when defenses are at their weakest anyways. 'There's no way anyone could get to the island in this weather!' 'Like she'd escape now of all times.' Just like that, they let down their defenses. In fact, it's exactly when it would be the worst time for these things that it is the best to do them."

"I-I see..." groaned Mia.

That's good to know. I'll have to try it the next time I'm thrown in the dungeon.

She wrote that advice right into the notebook of her heart. She was an exemplary locked-away princess, never forgetting that a revolution could happen at any moment.

"W-Wait! That's not what I meant to ask. What did you come here to do?"

"How odd...a lack of judgment I wouldn't expect from the Great Sage of the Empire. Isn't that obvious? I came here to settle things." Barbara then looked away. Mia followed her gaze to find a young child grasped in her hand. The girl's arm was bent backward, and her face was contorted in pain. It was the girl who had been by Mia's side until just moments earlier—Patricia. And in Barbara's other hand...was a knife, glinting with menace.

"Heh! My heart will never find peace until you and Lady Citrina experience some *real* pain. It would be excellent if I could get my hands around the Holy Lady's neck as well. If I could have it all my way, I would wipe out every single one of the filthy nobles that sully this land." Barbara

seemed almost drunk. “Well, the grand tasks can be left to others. For now, I’ll just have you, O Great Sage of the Empire. You’ll be coming with me.” She pushed the blade up against Patricia’s neck.

“H-Huh? I-Is your mind okay? That girl’s a Serpent! You would kill your own comrade?”

“My, this girl? My comrade?” For a moment, Barbara looked puzzled, but a grin suddenly filled her face. “I see. What an excellent excuse, but...what would your friends think about the Great Sage offering up a child for her own safety? Not to mention your intimation that it would be perfectly all right for her to die just because she’s a Serpent.”

Ugh! I forgot how obnoxious the Serpents can be!

Even if that girl really was a Serpent, Barbara would easily cut her down to fulfill her own ambitions. If Mia were to ignore her and abandon Patricia, the Serpents would use that fact to create a rift between her and her friends. Thus, Barbara would never recognize the girl as a Serpent.

“Well, if you understand, it’d be best if you stopped resisting and just came over,” Barbara said as though she had already won.

Th-This is bad. My only option is to do just as she— Suddenly, another thought occurred to her. *Wait, it’s not over yet! I have the secret weapon I used against Sion...my high kick!*

Mia would manifest this. She imagined herself kicking the knife right out of Barbara’s hand. The version of herself in her delusions waved her skirt and drew a beautiful ark in the air with her kick. The knife fell right out of Barbara’s hands, doing spins as it flew through the air. The vision gave her confidence.

That’s right! I was able to defeat that Chaos Serpent assassin Jem with my feet too! The wolfmaster or Dion is out of my league—but Barbara?

“Could you hurry it along? If not...”

“Aaagh!” Patricia let out a scream as her arm was twisted further. She shut her eyes as hard as she could, biting her lip.

“My, how unbecoming of you. A lady shouldn’t be violent toward children,” said Mia, her voice calm as can be. She was as composed as a master trained in martial arts.

Next, Mia boldly approached, keeping perfect measure of the distance between them.

“My, and where are you going?”

Five steps...four...three...two...now! Mia attacked!

“Whaaaaaaaaah!”

She let out a ferocious war cry as she swung her foot as high in the air as it could go. She had trained her legs on horses and through dancing, and they were *strong*. Her leg bent like a whip, drawing a crescent moon as it amazingly—*amazingly*—went straight through the air!

A strong gust of wind flew by. Mia’s center of balance was now toward her back, and the wind sent her pummeling backward.

“Whaaaaaaaaah!”

As Mia let out another ferocious war cry, something flew by with incredible speed right above her head. It was a blade glinting in the sunlight, and its trajectory passed right through where Mia had been just moments earlier.

She then landed straight on her bum. “Bwaaah!”

Tears in her eyes, she rubbed her butt, and after one...two...three seconds, a cold sweat began to flood down her back—she finally understood what had just occurred.

Th-Th... Th-Th-That... That was clooooooose! If I hadn’t gotten out of the way, I’d be... Merciful moons!

Mia’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. Barbara, on the other hand, just tilted her head in confusion.

“My, I missed.”

“Y-Y-You said to just come over...”

“And? Would you have chosen to just die if I had been honest and asked that of you?”

“Hm... Well, when you put it like that... Wait, no!”

For a moment, Mia was about to be swept away. But then, she furiously shook her head.

Th-This is bad!

Barbara had lost her comrades, and it made her incredibly hasty and hostile. In other words, she was a threat. In a fight that wasn’t about trying to find weak points but instead attacking head-on, Mia was absolutely powerless. All that talk about the composure of a master was a delusion! Kicking the weapon out of her opponent’s hand? Of course she couldn’t do that!

“Heh! Well, so be it. Given your position, it’s doubtful you’ll be able to

dodge the next attack. Lucky you. Your life just got that much longer.” With that, she lifted the knife into the air once again, her face contorted in assured victory.

However...that was a fatal mistake. The time Mia had bought with her roars had served a purpose.

“Well then,” Barbara continued, “just sit still and die, Your Highness.”

The blade glinted with menace.

“Eeeeeek!” Powerless against the cold malice falling from above, she closed her eyes. But then...

“Mia!”

That voice had her opening her eyes in panic.

“A-Abel!”

Faced now with his powerful back, Mia couldn’t help but let out the shrill scream of a fangirl.

Chapter 10: Banal and Ubiquitous Misfortune

“Abel Remno. What terrible timing!” Barbara snapped. Her hasty violence had turned against her. Barbara herself was lacking when it came to pure fighting skills. Even Mia had been able to (coincidentally) dodge her attack, which should speak to her skills.

Meanwhile, Abel had fought the formidable Ka Maku and had polished his sword against the prodigy Sion. His skills went above the average cavalryman, even should he not currently be equipped with a sword.

It should be noted that on Saint-Noel, carrying a weapon required permission, and that rule applied even to the children of kings. Thus, he had no weapon to fight with, although that only proved to be a minor detail.

“Empty. Stop. Seal. Even should your sword hand be *empty*, approach and *stop* right before your enemy, using your hand as a blade to *seal* your enemy’s capabilities. Grammateus often said that was the essence of Remno swordsmanship, and I see that his words ring true,” Abel muttered. Then, a clang reverberated through the air—the sound of Barbara’s knife falling to the pavement.

“You are not a knight because of your sword—you are a knight because you have someone important to protect. I feel like I’ve come to understand those words.” He glared at Barbara, her arm still trapped in his hands. “I ask that you keep your hands off those who are precious to me, Miss Barbara.”

“My, if it isn’t Prince Abel. How lovely it is to see you.” The corner of her lips twitched for a moment, but she quickly returned to her usual grin. “I see you are as kind as always, only forcing me to drop my weapon.”

“If it comes to it, I have no qualms about breaking your arm. For now, there simply is no need.” Abel glanced at the girl Barbara was holding. “But one may arise if you don’t hurry and let go of the child.”

“Are you certain? Breaking a woman’s arm is so crass... I don’t think the kind, sweet Abel ever could.”

Abel responded to Barbara's cajolery with a cold smile. "If you are trying to shake me, it's pointless. Do you think you could come up with anything more convincing than what my sister, the High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents, could?"

The figure of a small frail prince was no longer there. He was now a knight in guard of an irreplaceable someone. He wouldn't budge, and seeing his direct hostility, Barbara gritted her teeth. Then, she looked to the girl she had taken hostage...and gave up. She released her.

The sudden turn of events had left Patricia dazed, but she quickly returned to her senses, rushing over to Mia and clinging to her.

"That was quite scary, wasn't it? But it's all right now." Mia gently brushed her hand over Patricia's hair. Seeing they had safely united, Abel released Barbara.

"I really think you ought to kill me, Prince Abel. I won't be giving up. No matter how much I am forced to listen to the sermons of the Holy Lady, and no matter how much time may weather away my emotions..." Barbara's eyes were bloodshot, and she put on a malicious grin. "As long as I live, I will eradicate each and every noble that haunts this earth. You would do best to remember that," she declared, her face contorted by hate. It was limitless, so deeply ingrained in her, it sent a shiver down Mia's back.

"Barbara...what made you hate nobles so much?"

That question erased all expression from her face. "Oh, there's no grand reason. It's just that my beloved son was killed by the hands of a foolish one."

Then, she shared her story—the tale of but a single woman. She was a maid working in a noble's house. She worked diligently, was made into his mistress, and eventually carried his child. When the noble's wife learned of this, she flew into a fit of rage and banished the woman from the estate. Having lost her job and having no place to go, she resolved to find work in the town and live with her child as a family of two.

Those days were happy, but they didn't last long.

One day, a messenger sent by the noble's family had come to visit them, and he took her child away. The head of the house had suddenly perished, and his successor was in poor health. Thus, they wanted another who shared the noble's blood as a contingency.

While the woman worried for her child, she believed he would be well

cared for. And so, she rejoiced. But then...

A few years later, she received a message: her son had died.

A dry smile adorned Barbara's lips as she shared the story. "Commonplace, is it not? A hackneyed story that has repeated time and time again from here and afar." She snickered. "I know you are a fan of stories, Princess Mia. Isn't this one boring? Plainly banal. Now that it's tainted your ears, it is best you forget it. It does not deserve remembrance—it's just the silly story of a commoner. It is through trampling down their people that nobles become nobles, kings become kings, and emperors become emperors. Is that not true?"

Yes, Barbara was right. There was nothing unique about her story. The tyranny of nobles plagued every corner of the world. Thus, Mia didn't think that Barbara was particularly unfortunate, or someone who deserved any special consideration. Still...

"How sad..." whispered Patricia. And Mia agreed. Barbara was not looking for their sympathy, and the misfortune she experienced really was ubiquitous. It happened everywhere. Still, that was not enough of a reason to not take any pity on her. She might have done evil deeds, but her experiences were deserving of sympathy.

Even if it was a banal and ubiquitous misfortune, it still brought Barbara sorrow. She still suffered, and they all could easily imagine that.

Her anger isn't just directed at the noble who wronged her, but the countries who allow it, and all of noble society who can just brush it off by saying that this happens all the time.

Abel must have been thinking the same thing. His expression was pained. "I...feel terribly sorry for you. The fact that such an abuse of power can be allowed is the fault of all of us who sit at the top. I swear to do everything in my power to make sure that it won't happen again...that justice will prevail, and the society we create is a good one."

His words had Barbara laughing like it was the funniest joke she had ever heard. "Bwah hah hah! You promise to make a good government. Are you speaking just of Remno? Or perhaps you mean to instill that in everyone who leaves Saint-Noel so that the commoners will face tyranny no longer. I see, I see. How marvelous. Well done, Your Highness. But my past cannot be changed. I'll just destroy your justice for the sake of my revenge.

I swear...that will be my goal till I breathe my last breath."

Barbara would not waver, for it was her immutable past that drove her to destruction. But Mia could not kill her, and thus, there was little she could do. At most, she could only tell Rafina to keep her locked behind bars.

But is that really all? Despite that thought, she could not think of any more she could do. As she watched Barbara be taken away, Patricia once again whispered, "How sad..."

Suddenly, Mia felt dizzy, as if the world before her had been warped.

What was that?

While the phenomenon lasted only an instant, it left Mia with a strange sense of apprehension.

Chapter 11: Princess Mia's Empress Education

After watching Barbara be carried off, Mia returned to the dormitory. This, of course, was in consideration of Anne, who was bound to be beside herself with worry after hearing of the commotion.

I also need to report to Miss Rafina.

It would be up to Rafina whether she would take the extenuating circumstances into consideration, but at the very least she thought she needed to inform her of what they had just heard.

I bet Patricia was quite shocked as well.

Mia looked at the girl beside her. Her face was like a doll's and lacked expression, but a hint of fear remained unmasked. She had just been held at knifepoint after all. It must have been terribly harrowing for such a young girl.

It seems like I'll have to put a stop to my walks around town for a while.

Just as Mia was lost in her thoughts, Abel approached. "There may still be some danger lying about. I'll walk you back to the girls' dorm."

"My, but didn't you have some business to take care of?" Mia asked, worried.

"Ha ha! None that would take precedence over you," he said with a joking laugh.

"My!" Mia's excitement rose to the heavens, as high as a jellyfish at the top of a big wave. She had been down in the dumps until just moments earlier, but Mia was quick to shift gears.

"Well then, shall we?" Abel extended his hand with a kind smile, and Mia entrusted her own to his as red began to tint her cheeks. Briefly feeling like she was the princess in some fairy tale, Mia quickly came back to her senses and used her free hand to grab Patricia's, who gasped and looked up to her.

Mia smiled, trying to calm her. "Let's go. And this time, let's *not* get

caught by someone scary."

"Milady!"

As soon as they neared the dormitory's entrance, Anne came rushing over to them in panic. It seemed like she had already heard of what happened with Barbara, and Mia looked to soothe her. She raised her hand and flashed her a peaceful smile. This was the grand dignity of a heroine.

"Are you hurt, milady?! I was quite surprised when I heard..."

"I'm fine, Anne. Abel came to save me. He was quite dashing,"

Mia was in rather high spirits for having been so close to losing her life just moments earlier, and it was all thanks to the short walk to the girls' dormitory putting her straight into romance mode. Walking through town with one hand in Abel's and one in Patricia's, a sappy atmosphere—or perhaps just one of bliss—took over, and it relaxed her. Now, she was as happy as happy could be.

Oho! How fun. This is the happiest I've felt in quite a while.

"I'm so glad you're all right..." While Mia was hooked on love, Anne was obviously relieved, and she let out a deep sigh. Then, she turned her gaze to the girl beside Mia. "Um, milady? Who might that be?"

"Oh, um..." Mia looked at Patricia. "Patricia, this is Anne. She's my personal maid."

Anne bowed her head at Mia's introduction. "It is nice to meet you. I'm Anne Littstein." Her manners were perfect, but Patricia just stared at her.

"Huh? Patricia, you need to introduce yourself too." Mia patted her on the shoulder, but Patricia still just looked confused.

"Why, Miss Mia? Why must I introduce myself to a maid?" She seemed completely at a loss.

The idea that "I have no need to introduce myself to a lowly commoner" was what seemed to be common sense for Tearmoon's nobles. But...

That's a pretty bad way of thinking, isn't it?

Mia shook her head. "Why, there are many reasons. For one, your servants will do better work for you if they're fond of you. Having a grasp over your servants' hearts is a must for any noblewoman. In fact, it's incredibly embarrassing if you don't." Mia had managed to say something oddly wise. It seemed like the pure respect Mia felt from being called "Miss Mia" had put her in the right mindset.

Ha ha! Being treated like a teacher is pretty nice!

While Mia was letting her title carry her away, she stared right at Patricia. “But what’s most important is the fact that Anne here is my most loyal retainer. She’s my right hand,” declared Mia. “So, if you are to treat me with respect, you are to treat Anne with respect.” Grandeur overflowed from Mia’s face—Mia was a teacher of absolute dignity.

With that prompting, Patricia nodded. “I’m Patricia. Patricia Clausius. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Anne.” She picked up the corners of her skirt in a curtsy, eliciting a proud nod from Mia, who then turned her sights toward Anne.

“I apologize, but could you give this girl a bath?”

“Yes! I’ll be right on it, milady!”

For some reason, Anne looked awfully motivated as she pushed Patricia off.

Thus, Mia saw the two on the way before letting out a deep sigh.

Well, there’s plenty of work to be done. For now, I need to get a handle on exactly what’s going on. I hope Bel’s returned...

Too many things had happened. With her path forward delineated clearly in her head, Mia headed for her room.

Chapter 12: Bel Regales

“I’ve got to get the rundown from Bel...”

While smoke was about to billow from her head from all this thinking, Mia organized her next steps as she headed back to her room. As soon as she opened the door, she dived straight into her bed!

“I’m sleepy. I’ll lay down while I wait...” Thanks to her recent nightmares, Mia had become sleep-deprived (by Mia standards, that is). She gave one big yawn and then another. “Well...if I hand the girl over to Miss Rafina, she won’t be treated badly. Yup, that’s probably best. I’ll take the matter with Barbara over to Miss Rafina later and...fwah...”

Just like that, Mia began to doze off. What faced her next was a dream set in the estate of Duke Yellowmoon. Lorenz looked quite jocular as he shared some cake with Citrina, which was gorgeous, huge, and piled with whipped cream. Atop it were colored macarons.

“Whoa, so this is the clandestine cake of the Yellowmoons... It looks absolutely delicious!” A smile filled her face as she jumped on the cake. But then, she realized something...the maid holding it was none other than Barbara, and she wore a wicked smile!

“Huh?!” The world before her began to spin, and she collapsed on the floor, her consciousness fading...

“Hwaaaaaah!” She awoke with a scream. “Wh-What a terrible dream. Is this because I faced off with her earlier?” Mia was covered in sweat, and she let out a dramatic sigh. “Ugh, I’m soaked. I need to hear this report from Bel as soon as I can so I can head off for a bath...” And as soon as that thought had occurred, Bel returned, looking a bit pooped. “My, you’re finally back, Bel. Just where were you?”

“After Rina, I was caught by Mother Lynsha... She asked question after question... I-I’m exhausted...” She came up right beside Mia and collapsed on the bed. She pushed her face into the blankets, lying still.

“Bel, you’ll obviously be giving me the same explanation, yes?” Mia

glared her down.

“Ah... So, you want to know too,” she muttered, the gloom emanating from her voice. She turned just her head to look at Mia.

“Yes, as soon as possible. What exactly happened? Just why did you come back?”

Bel groaned. “Um, right... I do have to explain.” With that, she sat up, tucking her feet under her. She looked serious. “This isn’t my thinking, but Professor Ludwig’s. Anyway...”

Immediately, Mia had found a question she wanted to ask. “Sorry to interrupt, but does Ludwig know your secret?”

Citrina was one thing, but Bel had even told everything to Lynsha. Bel’s lips had always been loose, but for a descendant of Mia’s, she was incredibly quick to let down her guard, an incredible airhead, and quite okay with taking shortcuts. Still, it was hard to think that even Bel would share a secret like that so easily.

“Um, Miss Mia? You’re not thinking anything rude right now, are you?” Bel puffed out her cheeks with anger, but Mia simply laughed it away.

“Nope, not at all! Why would you ever think so?” Mia’s words tumbled out her mouth, and she waved her hand in the air to throw her off. “Well, anyways, could you continue?”

“I don’t quite think you’re telling the truth, but...okay. Um, let’s see...” Bel crossed her arms. “Actually, all of your friends know that I came to the past. In other words, the future I came from is built on the fact that ‘Miabel coming from the future to the past is common knowledge.’”

“Uh... What?” Mia looked confused, but Bel waved her finger and continued her explanation, her expression the epitome of arrogance.

“So, there’s a lot of people in the future who know my secret, which means it’s okay if my present self shares my secret with those people since that’s a fact of the world I came from.”

“Um, in other words...you’re saying that if you share your secret with those who have heard it from the Bel of the past, the future won’t change. Right?”

“Rather, the future might change if I don’t.”

While Bel simply nodded away, Mia kicked her brain into full gear. To summarize, the future Bel came from was one predicated on her coming to the past and taking certain actions.

This kind of feels like a loop, but... Well, I'll just leave it at that.

Mia had no idea as to how this all worked out, but in any case, she would just accept it. The ability to do just that was very important.

"The world I came from is also built on the fact that those around me knew that when I reached a certain age I'd be flung into the past and had prepared for that."

"Ah, I see. So you didn't come running back here because of some trouble that happens in the future?"

Bel responded with a bitter smile. "Yes, unfortunately. If I could have chosen when I ended up, I'd have gone to before I was shot with that arrow. It was really scary!" laughed Bel as she rubbed her neck. It got Mia imagining what it must have been like for Bel, having an arrow sticking from her neck as she slowly lost consciousness. It gave her goose bumps. Just imagining pain was enough to make Mia shiver. "Oh, that's right. In the future, you told me something about our family having cursed necks. Do you know what that might mean?"

While Bel looked at her expectantly, Mia put two things together. *I see... So, she hasn't heard that I returned from the guillotine.*

"Miss Mia?"

Mia dismissed her with a shake of her head. "It's nothing. I must have been talking about a dream. Fwaaah... I just saw the strangest dream myself..."

"A dream?" Suddenly, Bel's expression grew serious. "What kind of dream?"

"Oh, nothing important. I was almost poisoned, but..."

As soon as the word "poisoned" had left Mia's lips, Bel had grabbed onto Mia's shoulders. "This is important. Could you tell me more about your dream, Miss Mia?"

Chapter 13: Connoisewer Mia's Mushroom Challenge!

Pressured by Bel, Mia was forced to share the contents of her dream. Bel even occasionally interrupted to ask questions.

How strange. I thought I *was the one who was interrogating Bel, not the other way around...*

Thus, while Mia wasn't exactly pleased with the situation, she faithfully continued their conversation.

"Well, I think that's about all...but just what's so important about my dream?"

"I see..." Bel crossed her arms in thought for a moment. "This is just what Professor Ludwig told me, but it seems like dreams are our memories of worlds that don't exist anymore! Of course, it's not all our dreams and some are just normal, but sometimes, our memories from other worlds creep in and..."

"Hwuh?" This strange and sudden turn had Mia's eyes the size of saucers.

"Oh, I guess all this talk is too out of the blue for even you, Miss Mia! Um, let's see..." she muttered, looking around the room. "Um, do you play any instruments by any chance, Miss Mia?"

"Unfortunately not."

"That's what I thought. Then... Oh! That's it! Let's take a bath together!" exclaimed Bel as she clapped her hands.

The baths of the girls' dormitory at Saint-Noel was a place Mia knew well and had come to love. But just how much did she love baths? To the same level she loved cake and mushrooms!

Once, a certain thought had occurred to her—"Moons! Wouldn't it be just wonderful to take a bath filled with mushrooms?!"—and she had tried to put it into action. It made Rafina quite infuriated, an emotion she rarely

harbored toward Mia. But anyways...Mia was dedicated to creating the most pleasant of baths, sparing no attempts of trial-and-error for that aim. She was a bath specialist! A connoisewer!

As soon as they had entered the changing room, they were greeted by Anne and Patricia, who were just finishing up. Patricia sat on a stool as Anne carefully dried her hair. Having a maid's help in the bath was an obvious fact of life for a noble lady, but Mia noticed that behind Patricia's blank stare, her hands trembled.

Hmph... She seems to act like a proper lady of a noble house, but she's always on edge. She really has gone completely over to the Serpents.

"Ah, milady...!" Anne interrupted her thought with a gasp, and her mouth hung open. She was staring right at Bel.

Oh, that's right. I hadn't yet told her that Bel is back.

Mia racked her brains. "U-Um, Anne? I'll explain about Bel later. Just, some things happened, and now she's back."

"Sh-She's back...? B-But..." Anne was puzzled for a moment, but she shook it off with a shake of her head. "No, I understand. If that's what you say, milady, then that's what shall be. Ah! But Lady Citrina must be—"

"Yes, I've already informed her. And you said hello to Lynsha too...right?"

"Y-Yes, Mother A— I mean, Anne! I'm glad to see you again." Bel bowed.

Anne smiled kindly, lowering her head in turn. "I am as well. It's like a dream to see you again."

Phew... It looks like that went over well. But it'd be best if I hurry to inform everyone who was there at the castle...

Mia's eyes landed on Patricia. "My, that's..."

Right below the collarbone that protruded from Patricia's slender shoulders was a birthmark—a crescent moon that erupted from her ebony skin.

I've heard that Grandmother Patricia had that exact birthmark. I see their research was quite detailed...

"Does that bruise hurt?" asked Mia, groaning at the pain she must have experienced to gain that mark.

Patricia tilted her head, puzzled. "No. I've had it since birth."

"I see..." Mia stared at the girl.

They must have found a girl who had the same birthmark, or perhaps she's just lying? Or maybe...

"Miss Mia?" asked Bel. Mia turned around to find her fully de-clothed and ready for a bath.

"Yes, I'll be right there. Anne, my apologies, but could you keep watch on that girl for just a while longer?"

"Yes, milady."

After saying her goodbyes to Anne and removing her clothes, Mia headed for the bath. After scrubbing her hair, she rinsed the sweat off her body. Her encounter with Barbara and her earlier dream had left Mia dripping with the sweat of terror. Washing it all off was incredibly refreshing, leaving her mind feeling cleansed as well. Next, she dipped herself in the bathwater and let out a nourished sigh. Bathwater was nice whether lukewarm or piping hot, filled with herbs or completely clear—in other words, Mia was able to find joy in any bath there was to be had.

Oho ho! To think Bel wants to have such a complicated conversation in a bath! She really is of my blood.

With that thought, Mia glanced at Bel. She was slower than Mia, and when she came to the water, she stuck in her hand and let out a cute "Hot!" Unlike Mia, it seemed like Bel's youth still barred her from a bath-nourished sigh. After she had managed to dip her body in the steaming waters, she sat at the pool's edge and dipped in just her feet.

"So, what brings us here, Bel?"

"Oh, right! Um... Do you see the lines between each stone at the bath's bottom?"

"Yes, I do..."

The baths at Saint-Noel Academy were lavish and tiled with expensive marble. Just as Bel had pointed out, tidy lines formed in the gaps between each stone.

"Think of that line as the flow of history."

"I don't quite understand, but—"

Bel stood, cutting her off. "And think of me as you!" As soon as the words had left her mouth, she cannonballed into the water. The splash formed ripples, and they distorted the neat lines that could be seen under the water. Bel resurfaced with a loud sigh. "Did you see, Miss Mia? It's like

that!”

“I don’t see, actually. And I’ll certainly pretend not to see if Miss Rafina gets mad at you later for this.”

“Hee hee! This is necessary, so I’m sure she’ll forgive me! Auntie Rafina and I are really close!”

“‘Auntie’...” Bel’s innocent smile sent a shiver down Mia’s spine. But shouldn’t the two of them getting along be a good thing...? “I sure hope Rafina doesn’t become Empress Prelate.”

Mia began to worry that the path they had set down was a bad one. Bel, of course, paid this no mind. She waved her finger and continued. “According to Professor Ludwig...”

Chapter 14: Chancellor Ludwig's Theory of Time Fluctuation

Chancellor Ludwig had served Empress Mia for a long time; he was the most loyal of loyal retainers. As Mia's right hand and jack-of-all-trades, he had accomplishments in many fields. But by the time Bel was born, his work had diminished, and he had found himself with some free time—*that* was how dramatic the revolution led by Empress Mia was. It held firm, the system working without a hitch even without Ludwig's overinvolvement.

In fact, he had so much free time that he had started to feel bored. But that was when Mia summoned him to make a request.

"Could I get you to investigate the workings of Miabel's time travel?"

...An incredibly *absurd* request, at that.

"I have serious doubts that anything Your Majesty does not understand could be understood by me," he said with a bitter smile.

Mia's countenance remained firm. "Please, Ludwig. If that girl must go to the past, we should inform her on the matter the best we can."

Ludwig straightened himself at the earnest request. "Understood. However, even should I provide an answer, I will make it clear that it will not be a theory, but the simple reasonings of an old man. What happened to Bel is an anomaly, one that has never been experienced. I doubt it is something that a mere mortal could ever understand."

After his half refusal, Ludwig began to think. The first thing he did was search through records of the past. Had something so strange ever happened before? Were there any similar legends? Had anyone ever studied the same flow of time? He headed to Saint Mia Academy, now the largest research facility in Tearmoon, to continue his studies.

One day, Bel would regain her memories. He knew that—when Bel had appeared for the second time, she had her memories from when she had first slipped through time. Thus, the best way to determine the cause would be to ask her once her memories returned. However, it wasn't certain

whether she'd be able to provide any concrete information, and they had no idea how long Bel would stay between the time her memories returned and when she would once again be thrown into the past. Thus, it was important that he did everything he could in advance. So, he studied and studied and found...nothing.

"In which case, it is best we consider what happened to Miss Bel a miracle unique to her." After reaching that conclusion, Ludwig got word that Bel's memories had returned. He hurried to interrogate her, but her response left him groaning.

"A future of a ruined Tearmoon...it was from that world that she... Hm... I believe there is significance in that. Princess Miabel has twice traveled to the past, but the first version of her to do so was not the Princess Miabel of now. She came from a separate future and passed away in that ruined castle... Then, that future was eradicated through the valiant efforts of Her Imperial Majesty." Ludwig began to sketch. He drew one line that led to destruction and one line that led to the prosperous now. Then, he drew an arrow from one of the lines into the past, marking the destination with an X. "Is it the fact that Princess Miabel perished in the past that the worldline of destruction has vanished...? Wait."

A vision suddenly flashed through his mind—a guillotine looming in Lunatear's Grand Square, a fragment of memory where he begged Prince Sion to spare the criminal Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon. He had thought it to be an ominous dream he'd rather soon forget, but...could it be a memory?

"Unfathomable... Could our dreams be memories of forgotten timelines?" That realization led him to another discovery. "Have my memories of timelines unwalked remained, integrating into my current self through dreams?"

Suddenly, the lute in the corner of his room caught his eye—it had been a gift from the Chief of the Forest Clan. He still occasionally took it into his hands, and that was exactly what he did now. He pulled a string with the tip of his finger. The string wavered back and forth, creating the illusion that it was not one line, but countless.

"Are timelines the same as...?"

Shaking and wavering, existing as countless parallel lines that resolved into one, all heading in the same direction.

"No, that is not enough of a reason for Princess Miabel to travel into the

past. Just why did a tremor appear in our timeline?" Of course, it was possible that Bel's initial travel into the past had created the tremor, but that explanation didn't satisfy Ludwig. "That fails to explain her memories of Tearmoon's destruction. The tremor must have appeared earlier."

After discovering the secret of dreams, Ludwig began to keep a dream diary, writing in it what he had experienced in the land of sleep every single night. This was contingent—a record that would remain should the wavering of time consolidate to turn the current world into a land of dreams. But as he kept his diary, he began to recall memories that had been deeply ingrained in himself: the days he spent going every which way with Princess Mia in an attempt to save Tearmoon from its oncoming downfall. The Mia of *this* world was a complete airhead, capable of absolutely nothing.

"My memories must be getting jumbled... I am not exactly young anymore." He chuckled.

In any case, he considered these memories to not be a dream, but recollections from a different timeline.

"In which case...the origin of the tremor—the moment the timeline split—does not match Princess Bel's appearance in the past. Conversely, that must mean that the tremor *itself* is what tosses her into the past."

Thus, Ludwig researched all he could about the past in search of a hint, rummaging through records of conditions left by his old master Galv and the histories of all countries that led to those conditions. After his meticulous search...Ludwig hit upon a point of discord.

"It should be impossible for a great talent like Her Imperial Majesty to have appeared at this point in history." But at the same time, he thought of something else. "Could she be a messiah sent by the heavens?"

Mia was in complete relaxation mode as she soaked in the bath and listened to Bel's story. She was starting to get dizzy, so she took a moment to exit the hot bath and douse herself in a bucket of cool water.

"My...Ludwig's grown quite..." she mumbled. "He's a lot more...um...or maybe he's just old?"

It had started to sadden her, but in reality, Mia was looking *too* down on him. Ludwig Hewitt was the brains of the Great Sage of the Empire, but the theory he reached sounded like delusions. Where would that lead them...?

Surprisingly, his getting quite close to *Mia*'s truth, with Mia none the wiser.

Their talk continued.

Having doused herself and water and cooled her head, Mia returned to sit on the bath's edge.

"Well, Bel? Is there any connection between me and you coming to the past?"

"Yes. I'll resume my story..." And after washing off the sweat that had formed on her face, she did just that, revealing the theory of time that the future Ludwig had reached in his old age.

"Could she be a messiah sent by the heavens?" That was a recurring thought Ludwig had ever since they had first met. At first, it had just been a feeling, but it developed into a belief based on reason!

"The flow of history is one of causality," he said as if to reassure himself. A country would not suddenly fall in a single day; there had to be a *cause* that led to that fate. Similarly, a king could not suddenly fall out of favor in a single day; there had to be a reason that resulted in that fall that led to a corrupt government. All phenomena have both a cause and a result, and the *result* of one event always becomes the *cause* of the next. This cycle goes on unbroken, creating a single flow of time—creating *history*.

It was like a harvest. The seeds sowed determine the yield, each seed only capable of producing one type of crop. While there might be some minor changes along the way, the larger flow remains constant. If wheat is planted, wheat is harvested. The lives of people and the futures of countries were the same. Fettered by causality, all is forced in the same direction to some degree. And yet...

"Someone who thinks like Her Imperial Majesty could not have been born in Tearmoon in this era..." Or at least, it was incredibly difficult to think it *was* possible.

For instance, how old had she been when they first met? Only eleven or twelve, at most. Could a child start a revolution that would completely rewrite the history of Tearmoon? That was doubtful.

"No, even if she was an unparalleled prodigy...the natural steps she would have taken should not have led to here."

Even had a princess of extraordinary wisdom been born, the crown as it

was currently would not have raised her into someone of her morals. As he had heard from Galv, wisdom was not always used for good; it could be used or evil. And given the state Tearmoon had been in, it was incredibly doubtful that a Tearmoon Princess would use her wisdom for good.

"But Her Imperial Majesty was...different. She used her wisdom with magnanimity."

He recalled the events of the Newmoon District, still clear in his mind. She had approached a sullied child with no qualms, lifting him back onto his feet. Such compassion should not have been capable for one raised in Tearmoon's imperial household; unfortunately, none of her various instructors ever taught her morals.

Perhaps her compassion could have blossomed once she had gone to Saint-Noel's, but a princess like Mia appearing in Tearmoon at the time she did clashed with causality.

"Could a venerable sage like Her Imperial Majesty appear at this moment of Tearmoon's history? I think not, which means...she must have escaped the cycle of causality."

Ludwig had another reason that led him to that conclusion: the changes she inspired—the issues facing each country, the starvation that threatened to sweep the land, and the phantom Great Famine that Mia had imagined. The further his research progressed, the more certain he was. The world had been heading toward destruction.

"But then, the flow of time changed..."

Yes, the flow of time clearly shifted drastically whenever Mia got involved. Her influence was like a wave that swept the continent, cut off from the causality that should have defined history. At least, that was how things appeared to Ludwig.

"The High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents, Valentina Remno, had once proclaimed Her Majesty to be an anomaly, someone who deviated from this world... How apt a description."

Yes, Mia certainly was an anomaly that deviated from the causality of history. Thus...

"The shock she created was enough to shake timelines themselves."

Unfettered by the cycle of cause and effect, her action had affected history, changing the flow of time.

"She truly is a messiah," he stated, resolute.

"...Anyway, that's what he said!" Bel proclaimed with the haughtiest of grins.

Mia had been silent through the story, warming herself in the bath's hot waters. At least, she *should* have been warm, but a cold shiver made its way down her spine. She couldn't help but think that Ludwig's words rang surprisingly true. All this talk about deviating from causality sounded like...

I-Isn't this because I have my memories from the guillotine?

Mia's actions were based in the disappeared future of her beheading. Thus, they really must seem to be an anomaly from this history's perspective.

If Ludwig had maintained his memories from that future as well, I would have been found out! He would have known that I'm a tad...y'know... Ah! That was close!

In any case, Mia sighed a sigh of relief that her secret was still safe. In reality, however, it was a bit unclear whether her airheadedness was really still a secret.

"So that's that, but what about the reason that you came back, Bel?"

"Yes, about that..." she looked aside to gather her thoughts before continuing her story.

Shortly before Bel was flung into the past, she and Ludwig sat by the pond at the Whitemoon Palace for a chat.

"Professor Ludwig, did I really go to the past?"

For a moment, he was silent. "Yes... This is unworthy to be considered even a guess, however..." Ludwig picked up a stone. "Let us say that this is Her Imperial Majesty."

"The rock?" Bel looked utterly confused.

Ludwig nodded. "This stone is incredibly large and heavy. If you throw it into the water, well...watch." Ludwig threw the stone into the pond, creating ripples that shook the water's surface. "These are her accomplishments. They created a tremor in the cycle of causality. However, watch the waves carefully." Ludwig pointed toward a wave that had reached the other side of the pond. Hitting the edge, it began to return. "Once reaching this timeline's end, the wave she created recoiled. I believe that wave is what has carried you into the past." He scowled. "However, these

are merely the conjectures of an old man, my personal thoughts. It has yet to fully convince even me, so I beg you to not consider it too seriously."

"...So that's what he said! Though it seems like he wasn't completely satisfied with that explanation..."

"I see... So it is my doing that has brought you here..."

Sitting on the bath's edge, Mia splashed the water around and groaned. It truly did sound plausible. Mia affected the timeline, creating waves that eventually recoiled, sweeping Bel back into the world Mia was currently in.

"No, trying to explain such inexplicable circumstances is crazy! I'm impressed that he was able to put together something so logical," said Mia. But at the same time...

I get why she brought me to the bath since I didn't have a stringed instrument, but she just plagiarized that whole explanation from Ludwig, and she acted all proud of it like it was her own! Is she not embarrassed? She's really got quite the guts on her...

Bel gave her a puzzled look, which Mia met with a simple sigh. *Really, just who does she get it from?*

Mia's eyes landed on the water below her. It reflected her face. Not that that mattered...

"Oh, but Professor Ludwig also said that Auntie Rafina's explanation made more sense to him than his own..."

"Bel. Hold it." Mia raised a hand to halt the girl.

"What is it, Gra— Miss Mia?"

"Listen up. It's acceptable that you sometimes mistakenly call me 'grandmother.' And as for 'Mother Elise' and 'Mother Anne,' I can see it pleasing them, so that is all right. However...!" She gave a dramatic pause. "'Auntie Rafina' is absolutely unthinkable! Even if Miss Rafina may allow it, it'll make my life even shorter every time the words leave your mouth!"

"Really? But..."

"'Miss Rafina.' Do you understand, Bel? Even once you return to the future, you must call her that. Okay?" Mia made absolutely sure her point came across.

Bel nodded. "Yes, understood. But, um... About Miss Rafina's theory..."

"Oh, yes. What did she say?"

"Yes, Au— Miss Rafina looked absolutely sure of herself when she said

this.” Bel puffed out her chest. “She said that the Holy Deity flung me into the past so I could see all your amazing feats for myself!” Bel’s eyes began to twinkle. “There’s only one person as amazing as you in the whole world! You were a chosen one, so I was sent to the past to see your workings for myself so I could study them! At least, that’s what she said, and Professor Ludwig seemed to agree.”

“O-Oh. I see...”

Mia nodded, for the explanation really was easy to understand—a being of will and power thrust Mia into the past for a specific purpose. It was a theory based not on *how* the phenomenon took place, but *why*.

Mia continued. “That means your time slip was not a natural phenomenon, but an action with purpose. But...how does the other girl fit into things...?”

“The other girl? Oh, you mean...”

Mia nodded. “I thought the Serpents were just back to their usual meddling, but it really is strange that she appeared from the same light that you did. If it only appears when one has traveled through time, that would mean that Patricia has also traveled from some other point in history. Not to mention that this all happened right around when I had that dream...”

The topographical setting of a hot bath raised Mia’s base intelligence by 120 percent due to her “Bath Lover” trait. Bathtub Detective Mia’s reasoning powers were absolutely honed!

“Could my dreams be a result of this tremor stuff that Ludwig talked about? Could one have occurred when I considered entrusting Patricia to Rafina’s care? Could that have been the cause?”

How they chose to handle Patricia created ripples in the present. The fact made Mia shiver, but it also resolved a doubt she had been harboring. Would the Serpents know the secrets of time travel and use it to send over a girl that looked like her grandmother? That was too convoluted.

In which case, it’s best to assume that girl really is Grandmother Patricia.

While Ludwig’s theory didn’t explain how one could travel from the past to the future, it seemed that this was the best assumption to make.

“Oh, Professor Ludwig also said that maybe other timelines that were created by tremors exist alongside our own!”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, I don’t really know myself, but he said something about how what future history will converge to could be decided by how thick or thin a timeline is. Each one has a width, and history will always converge at the one that’s the thickest. Then, the thinner ones turn to dreams. So, if something happens that makes the dream timeline thicker then...”

“The worlds of dreams and reality would swap. At least, there’s the possibility.”

“Maybe, or maybe not. He said that even if it did happen, we probably wouldn’t know it did.”

With that revelation, Mia let out a screech that reverberated through the baths.

Chapter 15: It's an Attack!!!

A young woman walked through the halls of the girls' dormitory, her damp hair swaying ever so slightly from the wind as she took each light step. Now free from filth and fresh from the bath, her brilliant hair seemed to sparkle each time it swayed. Her silky smooth cheeks were dyed pink, and while her eyes were dazed and unfocused, it only granted her a charming sense of otherworldliness. Her dainty lips opened slightly as she gave a troubled sigh. This girl was...*Mia*, surprisingly! Yes, you read that right. This was a description of Mia, her head giving off steam as she gave a troubled groan.

If you add a *bit* of exaggeration just as Elise Littstein, the most famous author on the continent, did while writing the Princess Chronicles, this is what you get. Some rumors say that this was the origin of using descriptors to exaggerate text, but anyways...having alighted from her bath, Mia was currently deep in thought.

"Could that girl really be Grandmother Patricia?"

"But Professor Ludwig never said anything about that! Is that really possible?" Bel seemed doubtful, but Mia scolded her with a haughty wave of her finger.

"Listen, Bel. This is an incredibly important piece of advice for any princess. If we assume Patricia really is my grandmother and she isn't, or if we assume she isn't my grandmother and she really is...if our expectations don't match reality, which one is worse? *That's* what we really need to consider."

Now that Patricia was calling Mia her teacher, Mia was in full teacher mode! She elegantly regaled her chickenheart philosophy.

"If we prepare for the worst and the worst never comes, we'll be able to laugh it off as us being cowards. But if we *don't* prepare for the worst and the worst does come? Well, there's no laughing at that."

Mia's ultimate strategy was to prepare for a famine, and if one never came, to just throw a festival and eat up all the provisions they had stored.

Now, she was instilling the same onto her granddaughter.

“I see... Prepare for the worst, right?”

“Right. They say one who prepares never suffers... Well, they also say that there’s a mushroom waiting at every fall, so you can play things a bit by ear, however...” Mia folded her arms. “Most importantly, I really can’t think it right to leave a girl who has been educated by the Serpents in the care of another. If I want to be able to enjoy my food to the fullest, I’ll have to take it upon myself to be her teacher,” she stated, proudly. Being called a teacher was more fun than she could have ever imagined.

“So, this is how Grandmother Mia approaches things...” Bel muttered, impressed.

“Yes. What’s important is making proper preparations and having full stock. Thus, we have to plan our explanation to Miss Rafina carefully. We need to think of an excuse first, and there’s also you to explain... It seems like we have a lot to think about.”

“Right!” exclaimed Bel. “But first, I have a question.”

“My, what is it? Ask away,” laughed Mia, but Bel’s face was serious.

“What happens if an attack comes before you finish preparing?”

“Huh?” Mia followed Bel’s pointed finger to the doorway to find...Rafina. She looked to Bel, her mouth open in shock. But then, she quickly looked back to Mia.

Ugh... Th-This is bad. How can I explain this? Well, at worst, I can just have Bel explain herself, but what about Patricia? She’s been educated by the Serpents, so I have to be careful about how I explain things. If not, I could be in some trouble...

Steam once again began to billow from Connoisewer Mia’s ears. But then...

“I’m so sorry, Mia.”

...Rafina bowed as deep as she could.

For the time being, Mia would head to Rafina’s room.

“Miss Mia? What should I...?” asked Bel.

“Oh, right...” Mia took a moment to think. Based on their earlier talks, it seemed that Bel had received a proper education from Ludwig in the world of the future. Mia didn’t quite know if Bel had understood his explanations, but it was clear she had been listening to him carefully enough to remember

it. Thus, if she took Bel with her, she might actually be some help, but...

"Could I have you watch over Patricia with Anne?" Mia had made her decision. Truthfully, she did think it would just be easier if Bel could explain this all for her, however...

I feel like she might mess up somewhere. Specifically...she might call her "Auntie Rafina."

Thus, Mia decided it would be better to just explain things herself. Luckily, Rafina looked apologetic, so Mia also figured that she'd be able to push her around a bit.

I've got to get everything in my head straight. First, I'll explain Bel and ask that she once again be allowed to attend Saint-Noel. But explaining Patricia will be even harder. Should I just say she's my grandmother? Hm... I want something sweet. In fact, I'm in desperate need of something sweet. Once the lake is back to normal, I'll eat all the sweet stuff I can get!

Mia was invigorated! And in a short while, she would encounter a fortunate outcome to her miscalculations.

Chapter 16: Mia and Rafina Share a *Sweet* Talk

My! I know this scent!

Mia's nose began to twitch the moment she entered Rafina's room, for Mia's superior olfactory senses had been captured by the fragrance of black tea and the sweet smell of...

These are cookies! Or maybe some other type of baked goods?

Mia's eyes darted around the room, finding tea and sweets already placed at the table.

"Welcome, Your Highness," said the maid who prepared them. It was Lynsha, who now worked at Saint-Noel under Rafina while she continued her studies. While a scowl seemed to always adorn her resting face, today her lips instead formed a gleeful grin. However...

"Huh? Where is Miss Bel?"

"Oh, I had her remain in my bedroom today."

That comment returned her to her usual self. Looking at the pile of cookies on the table and the prepared tea, Mia came to a conclusion.

Ah, I see. She must have really given this her all.

The joy of reuniting with Bel must have given her an energy burst. Mia's grin grew wry. "My apologies, Lynsha. Bel, Anne, and a young girl are currently in my room, so do you mind if I share some of these with them?"

"Huh? But..." Lynsha glanced toward Rafina.

She responded with a grin. "I wouldn't mind at all. I was already thinking I wanted to chat with Mia alone. Please go take some to them." She nodded.

The response must have left Lynsha feeling a tad embarrassed, for her cheeks began to glow red. She quickly portioned out the cookies and rushed out of the room.

Hmph. I thought it would be fine to have Lynsha look after Bel, but it seems like she may be spoiling her too. No, she's definitely *spoiling h—*

Moons!

Mia flung a cookie into her mouth as she ruminated, and she couldn't help but sigh the moment it touched her tongue.

This lushness... This rich yet mellow flavor hidden beneath this mild sweetness...

She rolled the bits of cookie she had crunched off over her tongue, allowing its flavor to spread throughout her mouth. It was undeniably the taste of the highest quality milk, and it stimulated her memories, bringing her back to...yes, the plains of the Equestrian Kingdom! Specifically, the sheep and cattle that lazily munched away on the grasses of the plains.

Mia's eyes shot open, and she looked toward Rafina.

"Hm? What is it, Mia?" She glanced back, clearly unable to discern the meaning of the look Mia gave her.

"I see... It seems Miss Rafina is not one to be ignored."

"B-Be ignored?" Her shoulders jumped, which did not escape the notice of Mia.

The storm has made it difficult to get our hands on luxuries, but she's made sure to save some sweets! How can she be so prepared?!

Mia was as impressed as can be. She, too, was one who believed in the necessity of being prepared, and thus, she had quite a stockpile of sweets in her room. The storm had caused it to dwindle, but she would never completely run out. And it was for precisely this reason that she responded so dramatically to Rafina bringing out such luxurious cookies under these conditions.

I see...so Miss Rafina also quite likes sweets...

As a veteran F.A.T.oisseur, Mia was overwhelmed by the urge to squeeze Rafina's upper arms; however...she showed restraint. She was certain this would earn her even more backlash than the bath-mushroom incident.

"The milk in this has quite the potent flavor. It's from the Equestrian Kingdom, yes?" Mia was certain that they were made with the sarpir sheep milk that Malong so touted. "Oho! I expected nothing less from you, Miss Rafina. You're quick to make moves."

The sweets-loving blood coursing through Mia's veins recognized Rafina as a rival. It was only natural for any of such sugary mentality to want to get their hands on any new sweet avenue as soon as they

encountered it. How could Mia not be impressed?

"H-Huh?!" For some reason, Rafina was gasping and clearly flustered. Mia simply watched and crossed her arms.

She's already built trade relations with the Equestrian Kingdom. That must be how she gained the sheep that make such delicious milk... I'm sure it was a present from the Equestris. I can't let Tearmoon lose! I need to be proactive about forging our relationship...

Suddenly, Mia noticed that for some inexplicable reason, Rafina's cheeks were dyed red, and tears were forming in her eyes.

"I-It's not what you think, Mia! Please do not misunderstand. Malong and I only go on long horse rides together. A-And this only began because I wished to learn the art of horsemanship so I could go riding with you..."

"My, I see. So Malong is teaching you how to ride horses..." While Rafina was clearly embarrassed and running her mouth as if trying to think of excuses, Mia simply directed her a warm gaze.

So she's devoted herself to horseback riding so she can eat all the sweets she wants without a care in the world! Oho! She's got a surprisingly cute side to her. To think she'd go so far as to think of excuses...

As a veteran F.A.T.oisseur, Mia wore a dignified grin. "I understand the feeling well, Miss Rafina. There's no need for excuses, for I feel the same. Long rides on horseback are simply incredible."

"I-I said that isn't how it is! Ugh..." Rafina squeezed the hem of her skirt and gave Mia a spiteful glare. For some reason, Mia found her awfully cute today. "U-Um, by the way, Mia... Wh-What is it like when you and Prince Abel go riding together?"

As a veteran rider, Mia haughtily puffed out her chest. "Hm, we often take lunch with us, as picnics are awfully refreshing. Oh yes, the horse-shaped bread I make is something Abel is particularly fond of."

Mia's advice was a bit...questionable.

On a later date, Rafina would take this advice seriously, making sandwiches with horse-shaped bread. As a result...she would absolutely win over Malong's heart, but that is a story for another day.

Chapter 17: Mia’s Brain Is Full Steam Ahead...or Not

After amusing themselves with chitchat for a short while, Rafina softly closed her eyes and sipped at her tea as she tried to calm herself down. Then, she looked back at Mia.

“I would like to once again apologize for what happened with Barbara.” She bowed her head. “Not only did I allow her to escape, she infiltrated the island and as a result... There are no words that could serve as recompense.”

“...Oh, yes. Well...”

With the talk suddenly turning serious, Mia hesitated to find an answer. Or rather...she just failed at getting her voice out. Rather than bite into her third cookie, she instead simply placed it in her mouth, enjoying its taste and aroma as it melted on her tongue. She had been starved for sweets due to the recent storm, so this cookie really hit the spot. Even in the midst of a do-or-die convo, she couldn’t help but munch.

She tried to hide this with a smile. “There is nothing to worry yourself over, Miss Rafina. It’s the Chaos Serpents we’re up against; it’s impossible to completely defend against them. Plus, Barbara seems to have her own situation she’s dealing with... Given her persistence, it is very possible she would take drastic actions that we could never predict.”

“I heard from Prince Abel.” Her countenance remained grim. “It was the tyranny of us nobles that turned her to the Serpents. Thus, it is also the responsibility of that country’s ruling family and us who stand in the position to rule.”

The Central Orthodox Church taught that kings were not those who ruled countries, but those who had been entrusted by the Holy Deity to govern and maintain peace. Thus, it was also their duty to remonstrate other nobles who had turned to tyranny and victimized their people. Therefore, neglecting a woman like Barbara was also *their* responsibility. Abel’s words aligned perfectly with the church’s teachings. However...

“So you spoke with Abel...” Mia remembered his earlier expression. After hearing Barbara’s story, hadn’t he been awfully sweet to her? Was he forcing himself to appear happy?

I’m sure he was also trying to think of me, but I’m sure he also has some emotions he can never fully overcome...

To Mia, she felt that he had saved her. Had she remained in the gloom of Barbara, she would not have recovered enough to take care of the shaken Patricia.

Abel is *quite sensitive. I hope he doesn’t push himself too hard to show us kindness...*

Mia began to worry—would he take the responsibility of kings too heavily on his shoulders, bearing too much blame? She looked at Rafina.

“What Barbara experienced was a tragedy. If possible, I would like to show her some mercy.”

“Yes, I will take that into consideration. However, we must prevent her from escaping and creating such a fuss again. Or more importantly, from putting anybody in danger again.” Rafina’s words were quiet but firm. She turned away. “Still...I would like for her to walk a righteous path again one day. Executing a woman like her would be our loss. It would be a win for the Serpents.”

“A win for the Serpents...?” Mia muttered.

Rafina nodded. “*The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth* is a wicked book that turns those who are hurt and in need of comfort into those who are in need of judgment. Those who have been bewitched into committing crimes must be judged by the crown. Though those who become Serpents are the weak and injured. Passing judgment upon them can be seen as continuing to prey on the weak.”

“I see. Thus, it becomes grounds for fostering new Serpents. It really is quite troublesome.”

Not to mention, Mia’s own grandmother might have received that exact troublesome education. It really was enough to give her a headache. As she pondered how to explain things, steam once again began to pour from her ears...or *not*! The cookies from earlier had provided Mia’s brain with the necessary sugar content to lubricate the cogs in her head, and they shifted into full gear. Her wisdom now raised, she had a sudden realization—wasn’t this conversation heading in a good direction?

Wouldn't this be the best time to bring up Patricia?

Riding waves was Mia's true form. She didn't know when exactly this one had gotten behind her, but she offered herself up to it completely.

"Miss Rafina, could I make a request?"

"Yes, what is it?" Rafina seemed a tad taken aback, but Mia made her resolve.

"You might have already heard, but this is about the girl who was with me earlier."

"Yes, I did hear about her. Barbara referred to her as a Chaos Serpent. It appears that she was just trying to spread a rumor that you were with one—a cheap tactic to split us up. I am sure she was aiming to ruin the relationship between you and the rest of us."

"Sadly, that's not quite true." Mia's words were dramatic and heavy. "She actually has been educated by the Serpents."

Chapter 18: The Campaign Pledges Reach Completion!

“Huh?!” gasped Rafina. All the while, Mia was determining her plan for action.

First...she would keep the fact that Patricia was her grandmother a secret. If she started explaining time travel now, it would only leave Rafina baffled. Plus, Mia still wasn’t absolutely certain that Patricia really was her grandmother. Most importantly, she felt that bringing this up would dissolve the wave that their encounter with Barbara had created. Thus, she would limit the topic of discussion to one issue and focus all of her efforts *there*. Patricia was a pitiful child raised by Serpents—that was the angle she’d push for. Mia knew that meant more, and she’d push all of it toward that goal.

“Let our efforts be as focused as a mushroom!” were words that the famous General Mia knew well. She had already discovered how to concentrate her efforts on where her enemy’s defenses were the weakest.

Anyways...she would have to remember to keep Bel quiet on the matter as well. She *did* already go blabbering off the whole story to Anne and some others, but there was nothing that could be done about that now. The focus of their discussion needed to stay focused on one topic.

“This girl was raised by the Serpents to one day spread their creed herself, or to be sent to a noble household as a spy...that’s the sort of situation she has found herself in.”

“Wh-Why have you come into possession of such a girl...?”

Mia met Rafina’s angst with a kind smile. “That is so I can lead her down the right path, of course,” she declared.

At first glance, this might have appeared to be the last-ditch efforts of someone forced into a position that prevented them from backing down...but that assumption would be *wrong*. Quite honestly, Mia was not a fan of anything too tiresome. She would take the easy road whenever she

could, and when she couldn't, she would at least take things easy. She wanted to play hooky! And after all she had been through, she was begging to at least be able to this time.

That was the core of Mia's character, but in this case, she had sensed that this was an issue she could not disengage from. Even *Mia* could understand that.

Yes, should Patricia turn out to be her grandmother, Mia would have to do something about it, and there was nothing she could do to avoid that. She already *had* been driven to last-ditch efforts. Thus, she thought it would be best to just jump into that wholeheartedly, magnifying both *this* situation *and* the wave Barbara had created. At least, Mia's sixth sense was telling her that this would be the easiest road she could find here.

"Mia...you..." Rafina's voice quivered. "You're saying that we should do what Saint Mia Academy has done here in Saint-Noel."

"...Uh." Mia didn't quite understand what she was trying to imply. But luckily, Rafina didn't seem to have caught the confusion written all over her face.

"I have heard that at Saint Mia Academy, you are offering education to orphans, and that you have asked the church in Lunatear's slums for aid in that task."

"Oh...yes, well, they have helped me out." Mia's eyes became a bit unfocused. The Great Sage of the Empire's incredible pet project that magnanimously accepted orphans had reached its third year. She had heard that Selia, a first-year student, had exhibited excellence under Galv and his pupils. With her having set such an example, talented students from the orphanage had been sent to the academy city one after another.

I hear that the priest in the Newmoon District has been putting a lot of effort into this... Oh right, he was a Rafina fanatic. Is that why she's been briefed about the academy?

Mia was still confused, but Rafina continued. "You're suggesting we do exactly that here."

"Huh?" Mia could only blink her eyes, but Rafina was too entrenched in her thoughts to notice. She put her hand to her chin in the same pose as a certain famous detective.

"No, perhaps not. You must be considering this even deeper... It is the weak, the trampled, and the abandoned who become victims for the Chaos

Serpents. Orphans fit the description perfectly, and among them, there may be others affected by the Serpents just as the girl that you have brought here...” She grabbed her tea and drank the last of it. Then, she once again returned her gaze to Mia. “Could this be your campaign pledge for the next student council elections...?”

Hwah?

Before another strange utterance could escape her lips, she forced it down inside herself. It reverberated through her soul as she put on a calm facade. “I think that about covers it.” She nodded vigorously. Mia had already entrusted herself to the wave. It would be impossible to escape its waters now...or rather, it would just be really exhausting.

Even should this wave’s destination be an unintended or unpleasant one, she would ride it for now. Then, she would switch to a new wave should an easier one reveal itself down the line. This was the foundation for Seamoon Tactics.

Well, in most cases, Mia could never accomplish something so skillful as switching waves. Instead, she usually got caught up in a storm, forced to put in every effort she could spare just to make sure she didn’t drown. But anyways, she once again made her declaration.

“Saint-Noel will proactively accept children in danger of becoming Serpents and educate them. *That* is the future I wish for.”

“I see... Those who attend this academy will one day return to their own countries to govern them. You plan to create an opportunity for them to interact with orphans, altering the very foundations of the Serpents. How wonderful, Mia.” Rafina’s eyes sparkled with admiration as she grasped Mia’s hand. “I will do everything I can to aid you in this task.”

Thus, Saint-Noel Academy would soon establish a Special Elementary Education Course, which would one day become a trigger for institutionalizing the education of the poor which until now had been the responsibility of the church. But of course, Mia had no way of knowing all that.

Chapter 19: (Noble) Girls' Talk Has No End

I'm glad things seem to be cleaning up quite nicely... Mia gazed at the last two cookies on the plate as she basked in the pleasant feeling of satisfaction. *All our talks have gone well, and there are two cookies left.*

*The situation would have turned drastic should only one cookie have been left...*thought Mia as she licked her lips. But then...

"It seems I was completely mistaken, Mia," interrupted Rafina.

"My... About what?" Mia tilted her head in question, but her conscience was consumed by the cookies before her. This would be her last cookie, after all. They may reunite one day, but for now, she would have to say her goodbyes. She focused all her efforts to ensure that she carved its flavor into her tongue as she crunched away at it.

"About Bel... Seeing the state of you, I was sure that she had passed away. All of you seemed so down..."

"Miss Rafina..."

Rafina's utterance had reminded Mia that after they had returned from the ruined castle of the Serpents, Rafina had seemed even nicer than usual. She had treated Lynsha with tender care, and in matters within the student council, she had supported Mia at every opportunity she could find. She even watched over Mia kindly when her test scores were a bit...well...

She was looking after me, then. Mia once again recognized this. *In which case, I shouldn't try to hide Bel's situation with careless excuses but explain things to her properly. And not just her—I'll have to let Sion and Abel in on things too.*

But at the same time, telling each and every one of them would be a pain. Thus, she wanted to explain it to all of them at once. Mia was simply a devoted believer in maximizing efficiency and minimizing cost. But as she pondered how to accomplish this, Rafina continued speaking.

"Valentina had said something similar. She said that she had killed the

girl who was always beside you, provoking me and asking if I could let the woman who had stolen someone precious from my best friend live. It left me quite troubled." She put a hand to her cheek and sighed. Mia realized that her eyes were not smiling at all, and it caused her to shiver.

"So, she would speak that way to even you... She's cra...fty. I would expect nothing less from a Serpent." Hearing that Valentina would try to goad Rafina, Mia had been about to blurt out "She's crazy!" but managed to quickly recover. Then, she coughed, pretending that she had choked a bit on the cookie. Lastly, she sipped her tea, rinsing out her mouth and clearing her mind.

The important thing here was determining the level of danger. She calmed her mind and began to think. *Well, if I solve the issue of Patricia, I shouldn't have to worry about Bel too much, right?*

That was the conclusion she reached. Bel had come from a future where she had gone off and told quite a few people about her time travel. Thus, Mia could share Bel's secret if necessary. In fact, since she came from a world where there had been a need to share it with a few people...

As long as I don't do anything, I doubt Rafina will become Empress Prelate, and it seems like Tearmoon is stable as well...

Having solved all threats, Mia was able to relax a bit. Though frankly, she was just letting her guard down, which usually led to getting involved in terrible things. In other words...she was *summoning* the terrible.

"I almost let Valentina deceive me," stated Rafina with a wry smile.

Mia was cautious. "Actually, Miss Rafina, you were not mistaken."

"Huh...? What do you mean?"

"Well...I plan on explaining that to Abel and everyone shortly, but Bel has some...*unique* circumstances. Both the fact that she was shot in the neck with an arrow by Valentina and the fact that it ended her life are true."

"It ended her life...? Heavens... Then is the girl who appears to be with you now a...*ghost*?" Rafina's eyes were opened wide as her voice quivered.

Mia chuckled. "Oho ho! How silly of you, Miss Rafina. A ghost? Why, they don't exist! Oho ho!" She chuckled *nervously*.

Still, there were no laughs from Rafina. "Oh...I see. So you are unable to see them."

"Huh...?" Mia made a sudden revelation. Rafina's eyes were unfocused. No, rather...they were focused on something a bit farther away—somewhere

a ways behind Mia on what should have just been empty space.

It was like a cat staring into space, or a dog barking where nobody was... Her actions were undeniably akin to the strange actions of a pet...the sort that convinces their owner that *something* unseen is actually there.

“M-M-Miss Rafina...? I-Is there something behind me?”

“Hee hee! Don’t you know that there are some things in this world that you are better off not knowing about? Heh heh...” Rafina’s eyes were trained slightly downwards, and she wore a creepy grin. Mia was about to shiver and squeal before...

“I’m just kidding!” declared Rafina as she raised her head with a mischievous smile.

“Huh?!” Life had completely left Mia. “H-How cruel, Miss Rafina! D-Don’t scare me like that!”

“It’s payback for teasing me earlier. I was really embarrassed!” she said with a giggle.

Mia puffed up her cheeks in anger, but she quickly let the air out of them. Talking about love or ghosts...this was the type of lively conversation that was shared between any noble girls of their age.

“I see. So she has some unique circumstances. As this involves Prince Abel’s elder sister, why don’t we gather the whole student council and discuss? Would that be all right?”

Mia nodded at Rafina’s suggestion, but still...

“I’m surprised to see you’re so poor with ghost stories,” Rafina said. “Here, I have one you might not know.”

“S-Stop it, Miss Rafina!”

The lively Noble Girls’ Talk (Ghost Edition) would continue for a bit longer.

Chapter 20: Princess Mia Faces Groundless Slander

Thanks to Mia's talks with Rafina, the student council was called to a meeting the following day. There, she would explain the situation with Bel, as well as discuss the Special Elementary Education Course (SEEC). Particularly, Mia needed to clarify that this was not just saving the weak, but a counteraction that would limit the ability of the Serpents to breed more. If things went well, it might even stem the cycle that created those who wish for destruction.

She needed the rest of the student council to aid her in this task—to create an atmosphere that would encourage the rest of the student body to agree to her plans. Even should they get sidetracked by sweets and horror stories along the way, they needed to come out with a decision.

Was Mia's willingness to allow lenience in this discussion proof of her growth, or was it just proof that Rafina had been swayed by Mia? The world may never know.

In any case, as long as I highlight that this is a countermeasure against the Serpents from the outset, those who understand the whole of the situation should not offer any opposition, and I'll be able to create an excuse for us to all watch over Patricia... Hmph. I hadn't predicted most of this situation, but it appears that all should work out.

She nodded along with her thoughts. But why would simply leaving Patricia entirely in Rafina's care have created a tremor?

It's not like the present Rafina would have treated her poorly... How strange. Is there perhaps something that I *have to do...?*

Thanks to some sugar reserves still being stored in her brain, Mia's mind was working better than usual. Still lost in her thoughts, she returned to her room.

"Ah! Gran— Miss Mia! Welcome back." Bel greeted her with a gleeful grin as soon as she stepped in the door.

“Er, yes, I’m back... It’s quite cramped in here...”

Sitting around the table were Bel, Lynsha, Anne, Patricia, and even Citrina.

“I see you called Rina here too.”

“Yes, it was me who called her over, given the circumstances,” chimed in Lynsha.

“Tee hee! Thank you, Lynsha. This was really fun!” Citrina wore her usual sweet smile...or rather, this time, it was a genuinely innocent smile befitting a girl her age. It seemed that she really was glad to be summoned.

Strangely, Lynsha and Citrina didn’t have a poor relationship, as they both shared a love for Bel...or perhaps, the pain they had both felt at her loss had pulled them together. It was Lynsha who most worried over Citrina as she grieved, and at first, Mia had considered suggesting that Lynsha become a maid for the Yellowmoons. Should she be assigned to serve by Citrina’s side, she might have helped in Citrina’s recovery. However, Lynsha had refused.

“Princess, I am sure you have forgotten, but a maid of the Yellowmoons once bashed my head in, and it was Lady Citrina who lured me there. Do you think I would work for them?” She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders in exasperation. “Plus, should someone related to her—to Bel—be around her at all times, I am sure it would only remind her. I think it would cause her some suffering.”

While Lynsha’s words displayed sympathy toward Citrina, she might have been speaking of herself as well. In any case, the loss of Bel had caused them both immeasurable sadness, and her return had assuredly caused them both immeasurable joy.

Just as those memories flitted through Mia’s mind, Citrina stood up and approached Mia, coming up right beside her and staring into her eyes.

“I-Is something the matter, Rina?”

“No... I just never thought that you could be the grandmother of Rina’s dear friend, Miss Mia.” Citrina lowered her voice, for Anne and Patricia were present. Her glare turned serious. “Um... Are you in perfect health? I could provide you with nutritious substances to ensure you are able to birth healthy heirs...”

“I am fine, Rina, though I thank you for your consideration.” Mia’s smile was forced, but she quickly let it slide and returned her gaze to Bel.

“By the way, Bel. After talking things over with Rafina, we’ve decided to throw you a welcome back party tomorrow with the student council. I was hoping you’d explain everything to everyone. Would that be all right?”

Bel muttered the words “all right” as if to discern their true meaning before answering. “Yes, it will be all right. I think it will go as you predict!”

In other words, Bel would reveal her secret to the whole of the student council. This had been decided without any real confirmation from Bel, so Mia had been a tad worried, but her response had settled her unease.

“Thank you. Oh, and Patricia...I’ll explain the details to you later, but you’ll be attending Saint-Noel as part of the new Special Elementary Education Course.”

It wasn’t Patricia who offered a response to that statement, but Bel. “Special Elementary Education...Course?” Bel seemed confused. “How weird... I’ve never heard of Saint-Noel having something like that...” She furrowed her brow before taking out a large notebook.

“My, and what is that?” asked Mia.

“It’s Professor Ludwig’s diary!”

“Ludwig’s?”

Mia’s interest was so intense she almost toppled over in excitement. She *needed* to know just what that stupid Four-Eyes wrote about in a diary. But Bel’s next utterance was enough of a shock to supersede her curiosity.

“He keeps it in case a tremor causes dreams and reality to shift places! He writes down everything he experiences when he’s awake and when he’s sleeping...”

“Moons...which means?”

“Professor Ludwig says that the *Princess Chronicles*’ entries changed when time shifted. But since both dreams and reality are written in this one, we’ll be able to observe the flow of history more exactly.” Bel looked as if she had thought of all this herself.

Mia, on the other hand, couldn’t help but let out an astonished gasp. “My! How useful! I absolutely must read it as s— Huh?” Bel pulled the book to her chest and took a step backward. “What is it, Bel? Hurry and hand it over...”

“Um, since it might make you lazy, I was told you can’t look at it...”

“Huh?! And who told you that? How unforgivable! Just who could slander me so?”

“Um, it was...it was you, Grandmother Mia.”

“What?!”

Just as Mia did not trust her future self, it seems like Mia’s future self did not trust her past self. Mia was unflappable, and she was in awe at her consistency.

So, people really do never change... she whispered in her heart as Bel quickly checked the diary.

“...It really doesn’t say anything about that course.”

“Well, had Patricia never shown up, it would never have existed in the first place, so I don’t really find anything too strange about that...”

Mia glanced aside to find Patricia silently staring at them. She must be interested, but not a single word escaped her lips. For a moment, that felt strange to Mia...but she quickly discovered the answer: some cookie crumbs were stuck to her cute lips!

I see. Those cookies really were delicious. I completely understand how you could get caught up in relishing their flavor, as well as the wish to keep your mouth as closed as possible as to not let that flavor escape.

Patricia looked somewhat satisfied as she munched away at her cookie. Mia couldn’t deny that they were family.

Chapter 21: Princess Mia Has Changed a Bit

"All right, then..."

Their merry tea party had been held just before supper, and by the time Patricia had eaten her meal and sluggishly readied herself for bed, she was already half asleep. Mia ushered her into bed where she quickly fell into a deep slumber, adorable noises leaving her lips with each breath. Her sudden arrival in an unfamiliar place must have left her exhausted, and she looked to be the young girl she was with her eyes closed in sleep.

She looked just like a doll while she was awake, but perhaps that's just a mask she puts on.

Consciously putting on an eternal poker face to avoid anyone discerning your true emotions seemed like an axiom the Serpents would teach. Mia glanced at the bed next to her where Bel lay deeply asleep as well. Playing with Citrina and Lynsha must have tired her out. The sight of the two beckoned a yawn to Mia's lips, but she couldn't allow herself to sleep just yet.

"I have to tell Anne the truth about Bel first." Mia wanted to be the one to spill the beans to at least Anne, Elise, and Ludwig. In fact, she didn't just want to—she felt it was something she *had* to do.

They've done a lot to look after my granddaughter in the future... I must thank them for that. Plus, I need to borrow Ludwig's wisdom...

Ludwig had been the one to think of the Timeline-Tremor Theory. If he learned of Mia's grandmother's time travel, he may be able to further perfect it.

In the future that Bel came from, I probably made this request much further down the line...

Small discrepancies had already begun to appear between this timeline and the future that Bel knew, making it clear that the appearance of Patricia had changed the flow of history. Thus, Mia wanted to make use of all she

could in order to get the most accurate information possible. Or rather, she was just thinking that she needed to let someone smarter in on everything in order to avoid any danger. But anyways...

"Anne, could you sit here for a moment?" Mia patted her bed.

"Yes, what is it?" Anne seemed puzzled, but Mia's face was stern.

"I need to speak with you about Bel." She glanced over at the girl who was sleeping beside her. She looked completely tranquil—or rather, she looked *too* relaxed. Mia muttered to herself that "a princess shouldn't let anyone see such a slovenly face" before once again looking at Anne, staring straight into her eyes. "You may not believe me, but...Bel is my granddaughter."

"Huh?" Anne's eyes opened in shock. She seemed a bit panicked. "B-But...what does that mean?"

"It's just as I stated. She is my granddaughter. Don't bother asking me how she time traveled, however. I can barely explain it myself. Still, there is no doubt that she is indeed my dear granddaughter." With that, Mia shared everything: Bel's secret and the great favor Anne had done for her. "The last time she appeared here, she came from a terrible future where Tearmoon had been destroyed. Both Bel's mother and I had died, and she had no one to rely on. It was then that you and Elise exhibited the ultimate devotion and raised her as your own daughter."

With that, emotions swelled inside Mia's chest. Both Mia and Bel were indebted to Anne in a way that could never be repaid. In the dungeons, she had shown Mia unbreakable loyalty, and in a future now untrodden, she had showered Bel with love.

Mia bowed in gratitude. "Once again, I want to thank you for looking after her. You and Elise have done her a favor we could never repay. In fact, you have done the same to me as well... Truly, Anne, thank you."

Anne had listened in silence, but she finally let out her breath. "Then, um, the Bel here now is...?"

"Yes. After that arrow pierced her throat, she returned to the future—the one we had managed to change. So, it's all right. She seems to be doing just fine."

Mia could never hear the details of the future Bel had come from, and even should she ask, Bel may not tell her. Still, Bel's face said it all—there, she had been as happy as she had been here with them in this world.

“Understood, milady. Oh, um, I guess I don’t understand everything, but I do understand what’s important.” She put a hand to her chest. “I am glad that Elise and I could help out your gr— Miss Bel.” Her smile was as calm and kind as always. “In which case, milady, I will make the necessary preparations for me to sleep on the floor.”

Their discussion over, Anne stood up. However, Mia grabbed her hand and shook her head. “You may sleep in my bed today, Anne.”

“Huh? But I could never...” Anne hesitated, but Mia met her with a mischievous smile.

“It should be fine every once in a while, right? You are my most trusted confidant. I could never let you sleep on the floor.”

“But...”

“It’s fine! Come here. Let’s sleep.”

“Eek! W-Wait, milady!”

Mia tugged Anne’s hand, pulling her into the bed.

That’s right. Having entered the senior class, Mia had changed a bit. It would be a disaster had Anne caught a cold from sleeping on the floor, especially with the great debt Mia owed her. Their societal positions held no import—Mia was just consumed by the mission to have Anne sleep in a proper bed. In fact, there was a sense of urgency. She *needed* Anne to sleep with her.

This goes without saying, but of course, this was not due to the scary stories Rafina had shared at their earlier meeting. In the name of protecting Mia’s honor, it is necessary to state that clearly in writing.

She was not afraid of sleeping alone at night. Not at all! Now that she was a part of the senior class, Mia had *changed*!

Chapter 22: The Princess of High-Powered Gazes Returns!

When dawn broke the next morning, Mia attended class as always, leaving Patricia in the care of Anne, Bel, and Citrina. As preparations had yet to be made to transfer Bel to Saint-Noel Academy, she was unable to participate in classes, and there was nothing that could be done about that. Citrina, on the other hand, claimed she wasn't feeling well and *skipped* class, taking the day to play with Bel instead! She showed no qualms when making this statement, a smile filling her face. Still, Mia couldn't help but look the other way.

"Well, given all that happened yesterday, I perfectly understand why you would want to spend the day with Bel." Mia was feeling quite generous. Given the depression Citrina had been in, skipping a day or two was nothing. Kindness filled her eyes as she gazed upon her granddaughter and her dear friend.

Thus, Mia attended her classes seriously, but her eyes dropped with sleepiness as soon as the morning began. She swallowed a yawn, sleepy tears filling her eyes as she fought a desperate battle with the sandman.

Ugh... I'm quite tired. I must not have slept well last night.

Due to Anne filling in Bel's secret, Mia had gone to bed half an hour later than usual. She was desperately sleep-deprived.

But I mustn't let myself fall asleep! I'm the great teacher Miss Mia, and I must live up to that name! I've got to study seriously!

Mia fired herself up. She would not lose to sleep! She opened her eyes wide, becoming the Princess of High-Powered (read: Bloodshot) Gazes. Her lectures went in one ear and out the other, but she paid it no mind. The most important thing was keeping her eyes open. She focused her all on this task, becoming the Princess of (in)Sight.

Once all her classes were finally over, she stretched out her body. That was when she was approached by Abel.

“Mia, I heard that there was a student council meeting today. If you’re ready, why don’t we head over together? I see that Miss Anne isn’t with you today; I’d be happy to be your escort.”

“Oho! My, Abel. Yes, I would love that,” Mia said with a giggle as she accepted his extended hand.

She glanced at his face; studying it had become a habit of hers as of late. With slightly bloodshot eyes, she gave him one of the high-powered gazes she had so mastered. This, of course, was *not* to burn the beautiful appearance of a boy who was transitioning into a young man into her eyes. Of course not! While it may be true that Mia was not completely devoid of such wicked thoughts, they were an incredibly minor part of her attention, only making up about thirty percent. The rest of her reasoning, for the record, was that she was worried about him. She feared that he was pushing himself too hard lately.

After what happened at the Serpents’ castle, he learned that his sister, Valentina, was a Serpent—and not just any Serpent, the *High Priestess*. Their leader. Mia knew exactly how much that fact had hurt him.

Abel is as sensitive as I am... He’s terribly kind. It’s unthinkable that he would think nothing of that.

Valentina had also put an end to Bel’s life. Mia had stated that Bel was her younger sister, and now, her life had been taken by Abel’s elder sister. That would naturally be troubling him. Though there was something else that was bothering Mia: after that day, Abel seemed to always be pushing himself as a way to atone for his sister’s sins. He took care of everyone around him and dedicated even more to his practice of swordsmanship. In order to act as the perfect noble, he was pushing himself more than there was need for.

Self-improvement was a wonderful goal to dedicate yourself to, but given the extremes he was taking it to, Mia had begun to worry. Thus, she had started to watch him more carefully than she had been.

Abel’s smiling, but he looks a bit exhausted. The area under his eyes looks a tad dark... I’m worried about him. I hope he recovers and lets me see his usual smile once again.

This goal was another reason the Bel’s-return-announcement meeting today was so important.

If he knew that Bel was still alive, I am sure it would put his mind at

ease.

"By the way, Mia, what exactly is the meeting today for? Given the timing, I'm assuming it has something to do with the student council elections?"

"Yes, I plan to discuss that too. But first, there's something I need to ask you all..."

"Is it related to the events of yesterday, then?"

"Yes, I suppose so. It would be hard to say they were completely unrelated... Also, how is she, Abel? Your sister, I mean."

"Oh, right..." Gloom began to fall on his face as soon as the question had been asked.

Whenever Abel could find the time, he would visit Valentina in her confinement. She was located relatively close to Saint-Noel in a tower somewhere inside the Holy Principality of Belluga. On its surface, the building appeared to be a monastery, but in reality, it was specially made to imprison the High Priestess. The nuns who lived there had all been taught how to counter the guile of the Chaos Serpents.

In principle, it was forbidden to meet with any of its inmates. But in the case of Valentina, Abel and the others had been given special permission to visit her. Not only were they all nobles, but Rafina had put in a good word for them. Thus, whenever he could, Abel would go off to visit her.

"She's the same as always, I suppose. I've heard my brother has been visiting her as well."

"My, even Gain?" Mia found that a bit surprising.

"It seems that he has his own thoughts on the matter."

"I see... There's a chance that the meeting today will be a help to the situation with your sister as well."

As they talked, the two eventually arrived at the student council room.

Chapter 23: The Ultimate Student Council Formed by the Great “Sage” of the Empire

“Hello, everyone.” By the time Mia had entered the room, all the members of the student council had gathered.

“Oh, you’re here, Mia.” Sion, one of the vice presidents, stood to greet her. Now in the senior class, he had grown quite tall. He now had to look down at Mia to talk to her. His handsome features had attracted the attention of many girls at the academy, but there had yet to be any that grabbed his heart. “I heard that you went through it yesterday. I am glad to see you’re unharmed.”

“Yes, thanks to Abel.”

Abel gave a serious nod. “It’s thanks to our training together that I was able to save them.”

“I’m glad to hear it. We mustn’t let up on our training if we want to protect those we hold dear.”

The two clasped hands. Mia watched over their passionate bromance before returning her gaze to the rest of the student council. The four girls were sitting around the table and chatting. Next to vice-president Rafina were the treasurer and secretary, Chloe and Tiona respectively. These were the same members as always, but there was one addition...

“Hello, Princess Mia.”

“Oh, Rania. It’s nice to see you. Are the tea cakes from Perujin?”

“Yes, I brought castilla today,” said Rania Tafrif Perujin with a smile. She was the third princess of Perujin Agricultural Country. After the previous assistant to the secretary, Sapphias, had graduated, Mia had appointed her to the role.

Because of this, certain students had started to joke that the student council was just a gathering of Mia’s closest friends. It had earned her some

criticism both inside Saint-Noel and Tearmoon, but Mia refused to give it even the slightest of notice. She was too confident for that. She was absolutely certain that this was the strongest student council she could have created—there was no other lineup that could even hold a candle. Her reason for thinking this was simple: the Great Famine was upon them.

Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that the period that had led to the famine was upon them. Last year's harvest had been abysmal when compared to the previous year's, which had also decreased from the year before that. The situation was serious. A wrong move could lead to the people starving to death, in turn leading to the same tragedy Mia had once experienced in a single swoop. Having faced crop failures for the last few years, Rania's advice as princess of an agricultural country could not be ignored.

It was through surrounding herself with specialists that Mia was able to remain a yes-man. That conviction had all but chosen the student council members for her. Not only was there Rania, who perfectly understood the current state of agricultural produce, there was the daughter of Outcount Rudolvon, who owned the largest area of farmland out of all of Tearmoon's nobles. There was also Chloe, who, as the daughter of a merchant, had an excellent grasp on the current state of trade. These three were the best help she could get given the current situation.

For the same reason, Mia could not step down as student council president. The Bread-Cake Declaration was about to be tested. The current circumstances would not allow for her to relinquish her seat. Thus, Rafina had removed herself from the election, instead publicly announcing her support for Mia. Anyone could run for the seat of president, but there were none brave enough to go up against Mia.

However, that left an obvious question. In that case, wasn't there no need for her to write campaign pledges? If there were no opposing candidates, couldn't she just simply accept her victory? The answer was no. The lack of an election meant that there was even more of a necessity to prove that it was her who deserved the seat—that this was the *real* reason there was no need for an election.

This feels even tougher than when there actually was an election... Those were Mia's honest thoughts. But for the time being, Mia gave her all in writing her campaign pledges, and all who had gathered here were well

aware of that fact.

"So, Mia, what brings us here today? Is it about the next student council elections?" asked Sion with a tilt of his head. "Or could it be about the Serpents?" He slightly shrugged his shoulders. Sion had not been present at the final showdown with the High Priestess, and because of that, he always seemed to be a bit ambivalent on the matter. His servant Keithwood, as well as Tiona and Liora, seemed to be the same way.

On the other hand, the word "Serpents" had put a scowl on Rania's face. She had already been informed about the matter, and learning that Tearmoon's anti-agriculturalism was related had filled her with resentment.

As princess of Perujin, I'm sure she can't understand anyone wanting to turn the Fertile Crescent into a wasteland.

Mia gazed at Rania and sighed. It should be mentioned that the fact Rania's anger was directed toward the Chaos Serpents and not the founding emperor of Tearmoon was thanks to Mia's skillful machinations. Mia was completely intent on blaming anything inconvenient or unpleasant on the Serpents.

But anyway, that was a digression...

"Well, you could say it's about both...but first, there is someone I would like to introduce to you all." With perfect timing, there was a knock at the door. "Ah, she's here. Please, come in."

With that, the door opened. "Excuse me!"

Of course, it was Abel who was the most surprised at the voice that filled the room.

Chapter 24: Chairman Mia Mumbles Her Way through a Meeting

As soon as Bel had entered and saw everyone's faces, she lowered her head in a deep bow.

"Miss Bel! It's been so long!" Tiona and Liora rushed up to her with a smile. They had grown quite close during their excursion in Sunkland, and seeing Tiona put a dazzling smile on Bel's face too.

"It has, Aun— Miss Tiona, Liora."

Another came to greet her. "It has been a while, Miss Bel." It was Rania, her buddy in dance lessons.

Bel put on a familial smile and took her extended hand. "It has, Miss Rania. Have you been practicing your dancing?"

"Oh, um...at times, I suppose."

"Hee hee! Me too. I completely forgot about them!"

The two laughed together like children who had been caught in the midst of planning a prank. Mia couldn't help but grin at the warm atmosphere that had sprouted around her granddaughter, as it gave her a look into how Bel must have been treated in the future.

I see. What's waiting for us is the future that Bel has lived.

The realization left Mia feeling thoroughly satisfied, but that's when something else caught her attention: Abel was still frozen speechless.

Yes, of course Abel would be confused. I should hurry and explain things to him...

Mia looked at Bel ready to call out to her, but she was cut off.

"Explain yourself." A stern voice cut through the warmth. It was Sion, and now, doubt swam in his cool-toned eyes. "I heard from Abel. You were killed by the Serpents."

Shock swept through the faces of all who were present, juxtaposing with the reasonable caution that filled Sion's. However, this might have only been natural as well. A murder victim had just appeared before his eyes. Of

course he would find it suspicious. Not to mention the fact that Mia and crew were well acquainted with those who had a predilection for nefarious plots...

"Should you be an imposter of Miss Bel, a cog in a vicious scheme by the Serpents...I shall never be able to forgive you for making a mockery of my friends Mia and Abel." Sion made his quiet fury known, but it was Abel who held him back, his eyes silently watching Bel.

"Sion, I am positive that this girl is indeed Miss Bel."

"Abel...?" Sion furrowed his brow in doubt, but Abel instead put on an exhausted grin.

"Don't worry, I am sane. Well...perhaps I can't declare that with complete certainty, but I believe I am composed enough not to put my sanity into question." He sighed before once again returning his gaze to Bel. "For a moment, I believed I was convincing myself that Miss Bel was alive in order to partially absolve my sister's sins, that the emotions I had were so strong that they clouded my eyes. However..." Abel approached her. "I'm certain. This girl is the Miss Bel we all know well."

Bel happily nodded at Abel's conviction. "Of course you'd recognize me, Grandfather Abel! I'm glad you did." She grinned and grinned, but Abel tilted his head, puzzled.

"Um, 'grandfather'...? What do you mean by that?"

Bel looked toward Mia, who responded with a solemn nod. "For now, everyone, let us gather around the table. We'll continue this discussion over some tea, as I believe things are about to grow a tad complicated."

With that, Mia turned her gaze to the golden treats that sat atop the table.

And if things are about to get complicated, I'll need some sugar.

She gulped as she took her seat at the table. Then, she cleared her throat. "All right, Bel, please introduce yourself. As a princess, it is proper manners."

Bel closed her eyes to consider Mia's words. Then, she opened her mouth. "I'm... No, I am Miabel. Miabel Luna Tearmoon, granddaughter of Mia Luna Tearmoon, the prosperous Great Sage of the Empire."

Her introduction was grand and majestic, overflowing with the grace so befitting of a princess. In this manner, she opened her eyes. Hidden behind her long lashes, they exuded intelligence as she looked to all who were present. Yes, in this moment, she was the absolute embodiment of grace,

giving off the aura of a princess. And in the next moment...that all dissipated like a fog blown away by the wind!

She puffed out her chest with a triumphant and haughty grin that all but said “how do you like *that*?!” But immediately, her expression became nervous when she noticed the tepid response of her audience.

“H-Huh?” She looked around the room. “Oh, um, in other words...I came from the future.” Her face now looked a bit worried.

Hmph. She had quite the presence when she announced her name, but that didn’t last long. She’s just like me, thought Mia before stuffing her face with castilla. The sweet flavor combined with the crunch of the sugar coated on its surface was tasty beyond belief. The saccharine stimulus running through her taste buds pulled her brain close to disillusionment.

“You’re Mia’s grandchild from the future...?” Abel was the first to regain his composure. “Your appearance does quite resemble Mia’s, but...I see. That explains Mia’s reaction as well...” muttered Abel as he stared into Bel’s face.

“I see, so you’re Abel and Mia’s granddaughter. Your name must have come from combining theirs, no?” asked Sion.

Abel gave him a puzzled look. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? Think about it for a moment. Is it not simply ‘Mia’ and ‘Abel’ combined into one? At least, that was my thought just now,” stated Sion with a wry smile. After a moment, Abel seemed to have understood.

He nodded. “Yes, you’re right...”

The two looked to Mia, flustering her. It seemed as if her questionable naming sense was about to be shown bare to the group.

“Ha ha! It seems like your parents were quite fond of Mia and Abel,” laughed Sion.

Bel smiled wide. “Yes! My mother loves both of them very much!”

“A-Anyway, this girl is my granddaughter. She came here from the future.” Mia cut into the conversation in a panic, determined not to let Bel say too much.

Still, thinking about it now, there would have been no way to explain all this if they hadn’t believed me.

Luckily, no one seemed to be particularly doubtful. Rather...

“I see. I hadn’t noticed at all, but now that you mention it, she really

does resemble Princess Mia.” Chloe seemed embarrassed at the fact she hadn’t figured it out earlier.

“I had heard in Perujin that the two of you had some sort of relation. So that is what you meant... I had no clue.” Rania seemed a bit troubled. The others in the room shared their reactions.

“Then, when you were pierced by that arrow, you were actually...?”

“Oh, um... A proper explanation is complicated, so I’ll summarize a bit, but the me who came here before was from a different future, and I really did die at the Serpents’ castle. But then, my soul was pulled into the future that Miss Mia is going to build, and then it combined with me there! At least, I think it’s something like that.”

The entries in the diary had been rewritten, meaning that even inanimate materials were defined by the laws of cause and effect. Thus, the moment the future it existed in had vanished, so did the words. In the same way, when Bel had perished, her body became matter that vanished along with the future that she had come from. The one thing that didn’t disappear was the soul, along with the memories that had been carved into it. Should a tremor split a soul, it would one day converge in the timeline that was the strongest. However, memories would be passed down in that moment, carrying on as dreams.

Bel had begun to explain all this, but Mia hurried to stop her. Once tremors in timelines had become the focus of the conversation, of course most people weren’t able to follow. Thus, she stopped her out of consideration. Well...not really.

What she really wanted was to avoid any questions about the matter. It seemed like all the members of the student council were under the assumption that Mia could answer any and every question they might have, but...in reality, Mia didn’t quite understand all this either. In fact, there was a good chance she understood it even less than them. Thus...

“Well, let’s leave the complicated discussions for another day. In any case, Bel is my granddaughter and has all of her memories of living here in this world. She is practically the same Bel as the one we knew before. Does that make sense to everyone?”

...She limited the situation to what she could answer questions about, asserting that the rest didn’t really matter. Student council president Mia was the most skillful of skillful chairmen! A close inspection would reveal

that the plate of castilla before her was empty. It was only through her ample absorption of nutrients (and really, sugar) that her skills here were so impressive.

Chapter 25: Magniabel

“Yes, you’re right. There is no need to know how this world truly works.” Rafina had listened in silence, but she now spoke up.

“What do you mean, Miss Rafina?” asked Chloe, tilting her head in question.

Rafina responded with a kind smile. “It’s simple, really. What is hidden to us has been hidden for a reason. The word ‘mystery’ comes from a word that means to close one’s eyes and lips, and I believe that is exactly what we should do. The Holy Deity has made this a mystery, no? In which case, it is something that us humans are better off not knowing.” She took her cup of tea into her hand and sipped. “The Holy Deity has bestowed us with the knowledge we need to live in peace. The morals and ethics that rule this land are all written clearly in the Holy Book. Why must we not kill others? It is because the Holy Deity has forbidden it. Why must we not steal? That, too, is because such is written in the Holy Book.”

There are rules that are shared between and govern all people. It is only through them that nobles and the common people can reach agreements.

“It is the Holy Book, bestowed upon us by the Holy Deity, that has allowed us to reason, to criticize those who have committed evils on the basis of the laws contained within it, and to pass judgment upon them. All believe in the power the book has, and this is the reason its tenets are stated to us so clearly. They have been revealed to us humans because this knowledge is necessary for us to live peacefully.” Rafina’s expression grew stern. “Following the same logic, there is knowledge that surpasses us humans, knowledge that can warp us and send us down the path of evil. Instructions on how to deceive or ruin countries, for example. The ultimate example of this is *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*.”

Had none known how to ruin countries, all would have remained stable. However, it was because some learned those methods that some rushed forward on the path to revolution. The exact allure of *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth* was that it provided knowledge that would turn the

persecuted into the persecutors. Rafina was right—it really was better off not knowing such things.

“Thus, it is best not to know what surpasses us. That is what I believe Mia to be saying.” Rafina’s cool eyes turned to Mia’s, whose questionable plan had just been to limit the debate to questions she could answer, but it instead led to an exceedingly grand solution to her problem.

She nodded obediently. “Yes, I believe that summarizes things nicely,” she brazenly declared!

“I see. I believe you may be right about that. If we knew the future, we might be inclined to take a back seat,” joked Tiona, who didn’t seem like the type to do that at all.

Liora enthusiastically nodded at her master’s suggestion. “I think...the same. If you know where your prey is...you don’t have to go through...the trouble...of finding it.” Her simpleminded utterance put bright smiles on the faces of everyone in the room.

Gazing at the lively atmosphere, Rafina put a gleeful smile on herself. “Yes. Having knowledge of the future and other mysteries while staying modest and using it to their advantage is something I believe only Mia could accomplish.”

This was a decisive moment. The judgment of Empress Mia had superseded that of the Holy Lady Rafina, for the Great Sage of the Empire, Empress Mia, knew exactly how lazy she was!

“Hm? Wait a second. Does that mean that Mia’s belief in an oncoming famine and her efforts to stockpile provisions were because she had knowledge of the future?” Sion looked to be considering the matter carefully, but Chloe immediately offered a rebuttal.

“That can’t be true, because Princess Mia began to gather those resources before Miss Bel appeared here.”

“Yes, Grandmother Mia indeed began her preparations before I arrived here,” declared Bel. “In fact, she warned me to refrain from telling her about the future as much as possible, and that’s exactly why I believe she’s called the Great Sage!”

She magnified her grandmother’s accomplishments to the max. She was a maniac about magnifying. She was Magniabel!

“I see. How very like Mia. To think she would admonish herself so harshly...” muttered Rafina, clearly impressed.

“In that case, I suppose it would be best to bar Miss Bel from telling us about anything that will happen from here on out. Oh, but was it really fine to tell us about Abel and Mia...?”

“Oh, yes! I’m allowed to talk about that.” Having been asked a question by her darling Sion, Bel happily nodded and continued her explanation. Mia was completely convinced that she was about to share some knowledge of the future, but instead... “If my mother wasn’t born, it’d give me some trouble!”

How crafty of her! However, there were none who pointed that out. Instead, their expressions were all dyed with understanding. Thanks to her natural personality and her position as Mia’s granddaughter, she was loved by all in both name and reality.

Again, how crafty of her! Her natural airheaded personality had calmed the room in an instant. Hoping that this would have cheered up Abel, Mia glanced over to him only to find that his expression remained stern.

“I see... So, my sister did indeed kill you.”

“Abel...?” asked Mia, concerned.

Abel nodded to assure her. “Miss Bel, could I have a moment?” His expression was surprisingly serious. Bel, on the other hand...

“Tee hee! It’s embarrassing to be called ‘Miss’ by you, Grandfather Abel. You don’t have to call me that!” She flashed him an innocent smile.

It must have diminished his spirits, for he looked to be taken by surprise. “Oh, right... In that case, Bel, I have something to ask of you. Could you accompany me a bit later?”

“Hm? Something to ask of me?” Bel seemed confused.

“Yes. It’s about my sister...Valentina.”

“My, Valentina?” This was something Mia couldn’t ignore! She tried to butt in, but...

“It’s nothing too serious. I just want to follow in your example, Mia.”

“*My* example...?”

“Yup, to do what you did to Sion. I want to deliver a kick to my obstinate sister, but I don’t think I should be the one to do it. So, I’ll have my granddaughter do it instead,” he said with a mischievous grin. It immediately lightened the load on Mia’s heart, for that smile was the first one that seemed to genuinely befit his age that she had seen in the last few months.

Chapter 26: Someone Is Hit by a Stray Arrow...and It's Keithwood!

"Abel, just what are you planning?" asked Mia.

"Don't worry. I'll explain later. First, I want to hear what you have to say. Filling us in on Bel's identity and her return wasn't the main reason you called for this meeting, is it?"

With that, Mia could ask no further questions. While it did weigh on her mind, she returned to the issue at hand. "Abel is right. Bel isn't why I called this meeting. I have already discussed this with Miss Rafina, but I plan to establish a Special Elementary Education Course here at Saint-Noel Academy."

"And what exactly would that be?" The new phrase had Sion tilting his head in puzzlement.

Mia looked at Rafina, trying to remember how she had explained it to her. Rafina gave a gleeful nod, as she had mistakenly assumed Mia was asking for her to take the reins in explaining. She was happy to see Mia relying on her.

"Well, I shall explain then. Are all of you aware that the Central Orthodox Church offers education to impoverished children at our orphanages throughout the continent?"

All of them nodded in assent. The Central Orthodox Church strongly forbade the monopolization of any wisdom that could lead to salvation. Priests taught literacy so that the fortunate and unfortunate alike could equally receive the Holy Deity's grace. In other words, they taught with the goal of allowing all to read the Holy Book through their own efforts.

"The education they provide is both assuredly necessary and valuable, and that will never change. However..." Rafina shook her head. "That has led to the mistaken belief that it is enough—but it could never be. If we allowed ourselves to be content with just those efforts, it would be the same as forcing children to abandon all hope of proper studies just because they

were poor or lacked parents. We would be spurning them, demanding them to be satisfied with just literacy alone."

Her words put scowls on Abel and Sion's faces.

"They would become the weak, and as the weak, the Serpents would approach, welcoming them into their numbers," Rafina continued. "Then, we would have to pass judgment upon them as those who commit evils, which would only become the grounds for the creation of more Serpents. However, Mia has taught me the means of severing this unending chain...isn't that right, Mia?" Rafina looked at her. "I heard that you invited Selia, a girl who dedicated herself to her studies at her orphanage, to attend your academy."

After a moment of silence, Mia gave a humble nod. "Yes, I did." The truth was that she only forced Selia's involvement in order to avoid having to do all the hard work herself, but she threw that inconvenient truth out of her memories.

"When I heard that, I was deeply impressed. I realized that this could be a method we adopt."

"I see. We would be destroying the Serpents' breeding grounds, bringing it completely over to our side and nipping any possible future troubles in the bud. Yes...that would be quite the effective measure." Sion nodded, and Rafina followed with a hearty one of her own. Mia watched understanding spread across the countenances of all who were present and began to ponder.

Well, looking at how things are going, it shouldn't be hard to convince the student council of my plan. The real struggle is the rest of the student body. Just how should I...?

Still in her thoughts, Mia reached out her fork...and was completely blindsided! The castilla that had just been there moments early had disappeared!

M-Moons! Could I have...?! Mia panically patted her stomach before cursing herself. *Th-This is bad. I did it again...and Anne* just *admonished me to not overindulge in sweets yesterday. I'm sure I'll get a scolding from Tatiana as well.*

Just as Mia began to think that eating while distracted was the most terrible phenomenon known to man...she had a sudden vision of clarity!

Oh...I see. It's all clear to me now.

A voice reverberated through her mind. It was the calm, low voice of Lunatear's chef. "You mustn't skip your meals to only eat snacks."

Mia finally understood the meaning behind those scolding words. Why had he not just said to refrain from snacks? Why did he specify a relation to meals? That was because...

"To prevent one from overindulging in snacks, it is not enough to simply force the person to stop eating them. If one is hungry, they will reach for it even if it is forbidden." That was why it was not "and only eat snacks" but "*to* only eat snacks."

Mia continued. "To prevent one from overindulging in snacks, you must satisfy them with healthy meals. Thus, they will simply be unable to eat too many." Satisfied with the feeling of content that was seeping into her mind, Mia lifted her face. "Huh?"

She blinked, for everyone was staring at her, their eyes wide.

"Mia..." It was Rafina who recovered herself first. But in the next moment, she began to feel embarrassed for her lack of empathy.

I really...need to grow...

An effective countermeasure against the Chaos Serpents was all that had come into Rafina's view. Mia's plan would reeducate those who had been tainted by the Serpents, separating them from that ideology and preventing them from walking a path of evil. Rafina thought it was perfectly logical, efficient, and effective. But—yes, *but*—that wasn't what Mia had been after. Rather than a countermeasure for the Serpents, there was something bigger that Mia had been focused on.

Was it fostering talent that would support their countries? Instilling loyalty in the children that would be in charge of their future? No, Mia had denied all that. That was nothing but a result. What Mia had said was this: "Fill the children's stomachs with healthy meals."

That was the most important. Mia was completely focused on the children themselves, not just how they were to be treated. Her outlook overflowed with benevolence, and it made Rafina realize that she lacked the same mindset. At the same time, it made her incredibly pleased to have become one of Mia's friends. She wanted to learn from her kindness and one day carry the same.

"If we are to keep children from being tainted by evil, we must not

simply distance them from it, but fill them with good. I see, Mia...” Rafina muttered with a quivering voice.

“Hwah?” Mia’s response was notably much more discouraged.

The words Mia shared here would one day become a famous maxim.

“Remove the bad food from your children’s plates, but do not let them starve. Fill their plates with good food, and fill their stomachs plenty.” Along with her famous saying, “Boys and girls, be judicious!” it stood as one of Instructor Mia’s most popular proverbs.

(Incidentally, the latter of these sayings was spoken when she had once brought a group of children mushroom hunting.)

Still, Mia had been able to obtain the consent of the student council, and she raced forward with the establishment of her Special Elementary Education Course.

On the other hand, Keithwood, who had seen the entirety of the conversation, felt a sense of accord with Mia.

Princess Mia really never changes... No matter their country of birth, she will not allow talent to wilt unblossomed.

The path Mia had illuminated for them traced what Keithwood had determined to be Mia’s true nature during the Swordsmanship Tournament.

There may be none who are more apt for teaching children than Princess Mia.

While Keithwood was busy being completely impressed by Mia...

“Oh! By the way, Keithwood.” Rafina’s cheery voice suddenly filled his ears.

“Yes, what is it?” He should have felt trepidation from the fact that it was not his master Sion who called out to him. But sadly, the deep emotion he had felt from Mia’s words had scattered his focus. He had let his guard down, and Rafina mercilessly thrust her blade in his sturdy armor’s cracks.

“Mia suggested that I try making some horse-shaped sandwiches.”

“Hwaugh?” An odd voice left his throat before he could stop it, but Rafina continued her attack!

“I heard that you offered your help. Mia told me that you were an incredible cook.”

He shot Mia a murderous glance, and Mia...just nodded as if she was

saying, “Yep! I really did tell her you were super great!”

Well I guess that’s how it usually is, isn’t it?! Being praised for all the hard and grueling work I did should make me happy! Damn it!!!

Keithwood let out a discordant groan, but Rafina instead flashed him the smile of a saint. “I’d love to learn how to make them too. Could I ask you to help me?”

To Keithwood, even the smile of a saint could look sinister.

“Yes, I wouldn’t mind it at all. Do work hard, Keithwood,” said Sion. His pleasant grin inspired something akin to bloodlust in Keithwood.

Urgh! There’s nothing to be done... This truly is...

...A predicament on the same level as the time he faced off alone against two wolves. Keithwood patted his belly as he groaned against the overwhelming pressure.

Curses! How jealous I am of you right now, Lord Sapphias!

In that moment, Keithwood longed for his absent friend.

Chapter 27: A Bad Granddaughter Shares the Tricks of Love with Her Grandmother

The formation of Saint-Noel Academy's Special Elementary Education Course, while backed by student council president Mia, was not met with welcome. Outside of Rafina and the other members of the student council, most expressed doubt—or complete antipathy.

"Well, yes...I suppose as much was to be expected."

Those who attended Saint-Noel were the elites who would one day rule countries. Of course they wouldn't be all ears in letting orphans suddenly attend the same school as them. Still, Mia was reelected to her seat as student council president.

Of course, Rafina removing herself from the race was the biggest factor in this. But at the same time, there were none who expressed opposition to her campaign pledges. Yes, you read that correctly. There were none who voiced rejection to Mia's SEEC program. Instead, her pledges were accepted with silent opposition.

Nobody's raised any disagreements, and that's actually way scarier! I'm sure there are some who aren't pleased with the plan and are hoping for it to fall through...

What kept her opposition silent was Mia's overwhelming authority and the fact that the Special Elementary Education Course was the morally "correct" thing to do. Offering a better education to the orphans of the continent was compassionate and just. Thus, the plan was perfectly sound and offered no room for rebuttals. Yet...

In general, the more "just" something is, the more the opposition will despise it. I'm sure there are some waiting to trip me up at any opportunity.

Opinions hushed through absolute authority easily bubble up to the surface once the power dynamic shifts. And in matters of the just, once that

“justice” wavers, those opinions completely boil over. The situation wasn’t exactly desirable for Mia.

Since things have gotten this way, there’s nothing I can do now. I just have to carry out my plans perfectly so that there’s no room for complaint. I have a meeting with the instructor for the SEEC program this afternoon, so I’ll have to stay focused. Ugh...all this thinking is making my stomach churn...

The pressure was getting to Mia, giving her abdominal pain. Or maybe it was actually...

“My! I know this scent!” Suddenly, a tantalizing aroma hit Mia’s nose. It was the smell of charred cheese.

Yes, Mia was currently at the dining hall.

She didn’t have a stomachache at all—she was just hungry!

Coincidentally, Patricia was sitting politely beside her. Unlike Mia, Patricia had no slovenly expression on her face. Instead, she wore the inorganic look of a doll. Well, her hand was rubbing her stomach just like Mia, but anyway...

“Here is your five-mushroom gratin.” A steaming hot plate of food was placed before Mia.

“Oh, it’s finally here!” Mia’s hands stopped rubbing her empty stomach to clap. Then, she relinquished herself to the food’s aroma. The scent of charred cheese had her stomach letting out a growl. “I’ve been dying to eat this all day. I couldn’t focus on my studies at all!” said Mia with a mischievous grin.

The staff bowed. “Thank you. I will convey your praise to the chef.” With that, they left.

Mia turned to Anne. “Could you watch over Patty for me? The plate is hot, so I’m worried she may burn herself.”

“Yes, milady.” While Anne had simply been lying in wait, she was now fired up. She took a spoon in each hand, moving a serving of the gratin on Patty’s (Patricia’s) plate onto a smaller one. Mia watched the cheese stretch as the spoon moved. It earned another growl from her tummy.

That melty cheese is unimaginably delicious when eaten with mushrooms! thought Mia as she went to tackle her own plate. She took a larger mushroom onto her fork. It had been cut flat, and she made sure to cover it completely in cheese and cream sauce. After taking a moment to

blow on it, she couldn't resist any longer and plopped the whole thing in her mouth.

"Phoo, phoo..." It was hot, and Mia blew the hot air out of her mouth. The cheese wrapped around her tongue, and while it did put tears in her eyes, she continued to blow out air. Each time she did, the mellow aroma of cheese rushed through her nose. Each bite let out a pleasing sound as the mushroom snapped. The light flavor was colored by the cream sauce, and Mia absolutely relished it. She went on to the next mushroom.

All these mushrooms have completely different textures! Their combination really is the key to this dish, and each has been cut differently to best match their qualities... This chef really knows his stuff!

The mushrooms played a quintet in Mia's mouth, and she completely lost herself in it. The plate of gratin disappeared before her very eyes.

"How marvelous. Saint-Noel Academy really is the pinnacle of this continent. I thoroughly enjoyed that meal."

Not that the food was what really gave Saint-Noel that distinction, but unfortunately, there were none to point that out.

After finishing her gratin in a frenzy, Mia let out a sigh. She relished in the lingering aftertaste the thick flavor had left in her mouth. But then, she had a realization—Patricia hadn't finished her meal!

"My, Patty. Are you full already?" Given how small Patricia was, Mia thought that was the obvious explanation. But she shook her head.

"No, Miss Mia. I can eat more. I want cake for dessert."

"Certainly, but you need to have a proper meal first. Go ahead and finish it all up—and don't leave a single bite."

Patricia shot her a curious glance. "Why, Miss Mia? I was told that those of us with noble blood should leave some on our plates and only eat what is most delicious."

Patricia's answer had Mia feeling dizzy. *Ugh... What a Tearmoon noble thing to say...*

The girl had been raised as a member of the house of Marquis Clausius. Of course she would think like a noble.

This sort of thinking is exactly what gets Tearmoon destroyed...hm? Mia made a realization. *That's right. She's been trained by the Serpents, and their exact goal is destroying Tearmoon and plunging it into chaos! In which case, I better override this sort of thinking.*

“Miss Mia?” Patricia was still giving Mia a curious stare. Mia folded her arms in thought and reached a single conclusion!

“I see. Yes, those values do perfectly match those of high-class women. However...do you think they could win over the emperor?”

“What do you mean?”

“You must get close to the emperor, become his wife, and destroy him from within. Is that not true?” asked Mia with a serious glare.

Patricia nodded.

“Then you must refrain from the sort of normal actions that will lump you in with all the other noblewomen! Rather, you should completely clean your plate, taking care to eat every last drop. Doing so would leave an impression on him!”

A *babam!* could be heard as Love Tactician Mia shared her wisdom.

After a long moment of silence, Patricia gasped! Her face wore a deep—*deep*—look of understanding. “I see. I have learned a lot.” She shot Mia a look of respect.

My grandmother’s so gullible!

Mia’s face, on the other hand, was a deep—*deep*—look of “I got you good!” She was a bad granddaughter willing to deceive her grandmother.

Chapter 28: If That's What Mia Says...

While Mia had been chowing down in the dining hall, Sion and Tiona were preparing for their afternoon meeting in the student council room. Saint-Noel was originally built to only offer education at the junior-high level and above. Thus, offering elementary education meant a new teacher had to be procured, and today, they planned to meet with a prospect.

The Holy Principality of Belluga had sent information on the teacher, and Sion was currently looking it over. "So we really are forming a Special Elementary Education Course..." he muttered.

"What are your thoughts on the matter, Sion?" Tiona had been organizing some documents, but she lifted her face.

"I think it's...commendable. Mia's plan is both exact and multifaceted."

"Multifaceted?" Tiona gave him a curious glance, but it was Keithwood who nodded in response.

"...Yes, that's the perfect word." As Sion's vassal, Keithwood made an effort not to participate in conversations among nobility. However, that rule didn't apply among the student council. For one, Mia loved directing questions at those around her. She valued hearing the opinions of others, and it was undoubtedly one of the traits that made her an excellent ruler.

Thus, at his core, Keithwood thought very highly of Mia. Even if she might have forced upon him the laborious work of making horse-shaped sandwiches—*and* passed that down to the Holy Lady Rafina, beloved by the whole continent—that much didn't change. He held no grudges! Truly! But anyway...

"Um, what exactly do you mean?" Tiona still looked puzzled.

Sion responded, gathering his thoughts as he spoke. "Whether it's her aim or just a side effect, there are many advantages to it."

"Yes, you're...right. When Miss Mia saved...the Lulu Tribe...she built Princess Town. It became an...academic city...that develops wheat. It's all...connected." Tiona's attendant, Liora Lulu, agreed.

As Sion listened, he ran a pen over a blank space in the documents

before him. “Her main aim for the SEEC program is to prevent the creation of more Serpents. However, there is currently another reason to erect such a program—the Great Famine.”

“How is that related...?”

“The children who will be welcomed into the program are mainly orphans or those raised in the slums. Should a famine break out, they are the ones who will be abandoned first. People are starting to worry about possible starvation, and it is now, in this moment, that Mia is paying attention to these children. It’s bound to send a strong message to the other nobility.”

At the very least, Sion thought it would be a strong message to Sunkland’s nobles. Through Mia’s aid, Sunkland had begun to stockpile rations. While it may not be as abundant as Tearmoon’s, they had succeeded in procuring a hefty supply.

However, there were still some among the nobility that expressed doubt. While Sunkland’s main principles were justice and fairness, there may be some who would conclude that it would be best to abandon the orphans. It was easy to be moral in times of peace, but in crisis, many revealed their coldhearted nature. Sion believed it to be a sign of humanity’s weakness.

“Mia is trying to brace for such a future. She has always worried that a famine could strike this continent.”

“Though I hear there are many nobility who believe a ‘Great’ Famine is an overstatement,” stated Keithwood with a shrug.

Sion nodded solemnly. “It’s just as you say, Keithwood. What an ignorant way to think.”

Being too stingy with food out of fear for the future was an issue, but being overly optimistic and failing to prepare was one too. Not understanding the current situation and talking big about how there was no danger was also foolish.

“The true severity of the Great Famine is not something to be known to the common people in the first place...” As those words left his mouth, a thought occurred to Sion—for the first time, his viewpoint might have been on equal ground with Mia’s.

“You mean we can’t tell them? Why?” Once again, Tiona couldn’t follow his reasoning.

Sion began to gather his thoughts to provide an answer, but he found

himself a bit perplexed. Talking with Tiona had helped him see clearly, and he realized he found something fun in that.

“Well...there are two main issues that come with such drastic crop failure. One is a shortage of food, but the other is the chaos it incites in people. We may be able to ride out a lack of provisions should the common people be as orderly and systematic as our soldiers. However, if fear and anxiety drive them to violence, there is nothing that can be done to rein them back in.”

Should the supply chain be disrupted, the food supply would dwindle even further. Prices would rise drastically, and the poor would starve to death. Many would grow weak, leading to sickness. Stopping this chain of misfortune was not an easy task.

“To prevent that, the only option is stockpiling food so that no scarcity arises in the first place. You must gain the means to acquire those provisions and prevent the people from growing weary.”

“Ah, I see... To prevent that, we must not let them know that there is scarcity. Is that right?”

Sion nodded and continued. “Yes, and at the same time, it’s important that the people believe that their ruler will save them even should a famine occur. Mia really is something...” Having said all that, he now muttered those words as if they *had* to leave his lips.

“Her Highness really did plan for everything!” exclaimed Tiona in agreement.

In order to win over the trust of her people, Mia had held her Birthday Festival. She had her most trusted vassal, Ludwig, prepare everything in order to prevent a lack of foodstuffs—as well as to prevent the people from feeling that reality. She had worked hard in accruing a stockpile, making preparations needed to import wheat from far-off countries.

“Not only that, she made her Bread-Cake Declaration to keep anxieties between countries low. In Perujin, she grabbed hold of both the Forkroad and Cornrogue companies... She really did prepare for a Great Famine.”

Hearing his master’s exclamation, Keithwood seemed a bit puzzled. “But is that really true?”

“Is what true?”

“That Miss Bel is Princess Mia’s granddaughter.”

Sion folded his arms. “I wonder... It is quite hard to believe, but I don’t

think there is a need to doubt them."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that if Mia wishes us to believe it, I see no reason not to. I doubt she would tell lies for the sake of immorality. Hmm... This is a thought which just occurred to me now, but perhaps she is trying to prevent us from relying on her more than we need to. There is a difference between making the right choices because she had knowledge of the future and making correct assumptions of what's to come without that information, no?"

Tiona nodded. "Yes, you're right. If we believe Her Highness could do everything, we may lean on her too much. She never takes on everything herself, and she sees importance in delegating tasks to others."

Sion continued, his face serious. "Well, even if Mia is lying, there should be no issue in believing her anyway. She may even be telling the truth. It's quite outrageous for a lie she'd actually want us to believe."

"If you're going to tell a lie, tell a good one. Is that right?"

Keithwood's question elicited a shrug from Sion. "Well, that's a crude way of putting it, but sure. She once said that Miss Bel was like a sister to her, and if she had said that here, we'd have a much easier time believing it."

"Yes, it would be easier to believe she miraculously survived that arrow than to believe she came from the future. Prince Abel was there to see it, but all he said was that she disappeared into the light..." added Tiona.

Bel had glowed the night they were attacked by the wolfmaster as well. If Mia had said this was the same phenomenon, it would have been easy to believe. And of course, it goes without saying that Mia wouldn't have thought of such an explanation.

"Yes, she must either have a reason for giving us one of the least believable explanations, or she must be telling the truth..." muttered Keithwood.

Sion gave a wry smile and shook his head. "That would be the logical conclusion. However, I'd like to propose something else."

"And that'd be?"

"Let us believe in our friends. That is all. Abel had a hunch that Miss Bel was his granddaughter, and I shall believe him. I believe Mia as well. I see no reason for doubt." He glanced at Tiona. "Don't you agree, Tiona?"

"Yes, I'd like to believe them too. If that's what Her Highness says, then

that’s what shall be...”

With the timing of a devil, Mia entered the room. “My, what were you all discussing?” asked Mia with a puzzled look. The only response she got were kind smiles.

Chapter 29: Authoritarian Mia!

"I apologize for making you all wait."

When Mia entered the room all eyes went to her...the girl standing beside Mia, that is.

"Is that the girl you mentioned earlier?" Sion asked the question that was on all their minds.

Mia nodded in response. "Yes, she is. Patty, please introduce yourself. This is Prince Sion."

"Prince...Sion?" Patty hung her head in confusion, but Sion gave her a kind smile.

"It's nice to make your acquaintance, miss. I'm Sion Sol Sunkland, Sunkland's first prince."

"Sunkland...? But I don't know a prince with that—"

"Patty, take his word for it," said Mia with a wink.

"I see. I shall." Her expression remained unchanged, but she gave Mia a vigorous nod of "okey dokey!" Then, she bowed. "I am Patricia Clausius. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Watching her grand introduction, Mia couldn't help but think, *This girl doesn't even change her attitude for Sion!*

Whether they be young, old, or anywhere in between, Sion Sol Sunkland charmed all the ladies of the world. Even Mia had once been taken by his handsome smile.

And yet, she doesn't seem taken by him at all! She's not even nervous... I guess I should be proud of my grandmother? Or maybe I should lament how deeply rooted the teachings of the Serpents are in her. Perhaps there's something else stopping her from getting hooked on love...

While Mia was deep in her thoughts, Rania, then Chloe, entered the room. Last was Rafina, who was accompanied by someone new.

"Then I believe we've all gathered," stated Rafina with a cool smile. Mia glanced at the man standing beside her.

Abel isn't here at the moment, so I need to give this all I've got!

Yes, Abel was currently absent from the island of Saint-Noel. He had brought Bel to meet his sister. Abel was always beside her as support, and Mia felt the weight of his absence. Still, she puffed out a sigh and opened her mouth.

"Who is this, Miss Rafina?"

A tall man of delicate features stood before her. He appeared to be in his late twenties, or perhaps his early thirties. The glasses of an intellectual adorned his handsome face, and his eyes smiled calmly behind them. While he wasn't as attractive as Sion or Abel, he was quite handsome. If Esmeralda were here, she might ask him to be her butler. But of course, Mia was no Esmeralda, and she paid his looks little mind.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Julius." He took a step backward as he said this, placing a hand to his chest as he bowed in the traditional manner of Tearmoon nobility.

"Oh, the pleasure is mine. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon." Mia picked up the hem of her skirt and returned his bow with a curtsy. The rest of the student council made their introductions as well. "I'm quite surprised. Are you from Tearmoon? What family?"

Julius scratched his head, looking embarrassed. "My apologies. My house is no longer, so I try to refrain from mentioning it. Are you familiar with Viscount Overadt?"

"Hm... Yes, I believe I have heard the name at least once before, but I'm not too certain of the details..." said Mia with a forced smile. She actually hadn't *ever* heard the name, but anyway... "I am glad to see that you seem so reliable."

Julius opened his eyes wide in shock. "I seem...reliable?" He seemed doubtful, and it left Mia puzzled. "After receiving the title of viscount and financial aid from the previous emperor, we wasted it, losing our rank. We are a house of imbeciles..."

"Oho! What are you saying? You might have lost your rank, but by the time you would have inherited it, there was nothing you could do, could you?"

Mia was suddenly back in the days she spent running around Tearmoon with Ludwig in an attempt to escape destruction. Despite all the places they visited and doing all they could, it was already too late.

Being bequeathed misfortune from your ancestors is quite the common

experience, huh? Not to mention... Mia stared at Julius's features. Her eyes were trained on one thing in particular, as if the rest was of no importance at all.

"Rank is hereditary; it is no grounds for placing trust. If you gained it through your own talents, perhaps that would be enough reason, but..."

Mia knew many fools who approached her on grounds of their great names only to reveal their own stupidity. When Tearmoon was on its last legs, there were none who acted in a way that befitted their titles. Even the Four Dukes could not be trusted, and they were of the highest rank. Ludwig was a commoner, and he was much more helpful. Thus, Mia refrained from judging people based on rank.

"Rather, I find you reliable because of what you have accomplished. When your house fell, you ended up in a foreign land with no support, making a name for yourself through your studies. Is that not what's most important?"

Mia appealed to his accomplishments, but there was one thing that inspired even greater trust in her.

"I see... So that is the thinking of the Great Sage..." Julius was deeply moved, and it put a cheery smile on Rafina's face.

"Tee hee! You're surprised, aren't you? Mia is flexible in her thinking. She doesn't place importance on rank or other forms of preexisting authority."

As Mia listened to Rafina's voice, she stared at Julius's face. Specifically, she stared at his *handsome* face...or really...the glasses that sat atop it!

Those glasses really give him a Ludwig vibe. I'm certain I'm right in my assessment!

Mia may pay little attention to authority by name, but she was a slave to authority by glasses. She was a (glasses) authoritarian!

Chapter 30: Gather Thy High-Kickers

Lake Noelige surrounded the island of Saint-Noel. While it had recently been rough with stormy waters, its surface was now calm. To its left, a single carriage could be seen—it was the "High Priestess Valentina Remno Revenge Brigade" (aka the High-Kickers).

Its members were Prince Abel of Remno whose very own granddaughter had been killed by Valentina, and the murdered girl herself, Miabel. While they were not directly related to this incident, there was also Lynsha who had her head bashed in by the Serpents and...Citrina, who had gone through quite a bit of trauma at the hands of Valentina.

Yes, even Citrina had wormed her way into the group. She sat there politely, her lips wearing their usual sweet smile. Once she had heard that Bel would be visiting to settle some scores, she insisted that she go with her—her face grinning as she made the request. Bel, at first, had been excited to go on a trip with her friend after such a long time, but Citrina's grin was so...something...that it instead made her a bit worried. Thus, she decided to set her worries straight in the carriage.

"Rina, um...are you also planning on taking revenge?"

Citrina kept her smile. "Of course. Rina went through some really bad things and has some words for the High Priestess."

"Um, just to make sure...you only have *words* for her, right?"

"Of course. Rina won't resort to violence."

"Really? Are you sure...?" Bel stared into Citrina's eyes. But Citrina looked away. Bel sighed. "Rina, there's something I want to tell you." Bel's face grew serious. "The Rina I know in the future is really, *really* kind." Bel tilted her head as if she didn't fully believe those words. "Or rather, well, you're scary when I skip my studies sometimes...and when dancing...b-but you're *usually* really kind. Usually." Bel wasn't being very clear, but anyway...she took Citrina's hand in hers. "And there's something you told me. You said that the reason you can smile like this is because you didn't have to be involved in assassinations or any of that other shady stuff.

Because Grandmother Mia built the word she did... That's the Rina I love, and I love spending time with you. So please, don't lose your composure."

"Bel..." Hearing Bel's unusually serious tone, Citrina gave a solemn nod. "Of course...Rina would never make you sad. I never thought of doing that at all."

"Really...?"

"Really. Rina never considered it... Well...maybe just a bit..." Citrina's eyes once again darted around as if uneasy.

But Bel wasn't going to let her get away! She took a step forward—the same step as her Grandpa Abel when he was about to release a strike from his blade! "If you're thinking about taking revenge for me, you don't have to. And if—just if—you were thinking of taking revenge for yourself, then please. Don't." After robbing Citrina of her reason for revenge, Bel giggled. "Grandmother Mia went through all the trouble of making sure the Yellowmoons never had to be assassins again! So please treasure that. You don't have to hurt anybody anymore."

"Bel..." Citrina blinked, tears forming in her eyes.

"Oh, but...if you just made her stomach hurt so she couldn't eat for ten days or so, then..."

"...Rina can't do that."

"Then three days. If you had medicine that'd give her a bellyache for just three days..."

"Cut it out." Abel had simply been listening until now, but he couldn't stay out of the conversation any longer. "Miss Citrina, I never had a chance to talk to you until now, but let me once again apologize." He hung his head. "My sister caused you great trouble. If there is anything I can do as recompense..."

"Oh, no..." Citrina seemed a bit panicked, but she quickly regained her usual grin. Or really, this one looked more like the grin of a child about to play a prank. "Actually, in that case, can you promise Rina something, Prince Abel?"

"What is it?"

"Please get along with Princess Mia and create a warm, happy family."

"Hm?" Abel seemed to not know what she was talking about at all.

"Since this involves my dear friend, I can't stay out of it. Even if it's just a mistake, you must not have any affairs." Citrina seemed to absolutely be

enjoying teasing him, but it was Bel who responded to her and not Abel.

"Don't worry, Rina! Grandfather Abel is famous for how much he loves Grandmother Mia! He would never cheat. They're so lovey-dovey it's embarrassing for *me* sometimes."

"Huh?!" Abel couldn't help the scream that came out of his mouth. Having been so preoccupied with his sister, he had never made the connection. The girl right in front of him—Bel—was proof that he and Mia married in the future.

With an innocent smile, Bel now turned to Citrina. "You're as lovey-dovey as Rina and her husband are!" Her smile wasn't innocent—it was the grin of a devil. "I get embarrassed watching you guys too..."

"H-Huh?! S-Stop it, Bel!"

The stray arrow that was Bel's words hit its target dead-on, eliciting a cough from Citrina. Bel's arrows fired indiscriminately and exactly, hitting both Citrina and Abel. As if they had come from cupid's bow, they inspired certain emotions in the two: a sweet budding love...or really, a shared feeling of victimhood!

These were the same feelings that had budded between Keithwood and Sapphias, an ability passed down through Mia's bloodline! Amid the carnage, Lynsha made sure to keep her presence as invisible as possible so as to not be her next victim.

Thus, the lively High-Kickers made their way to the tower that locked away Valentina Remno.

Chapter 31: Princess Mia Is Tattled On!

Heaven's Purgatory was a secret white tower that stood in the southern region of Belluga. Made from smooth riverblossom stone, the prison was both exceedingly beautiful and grand.

"Whoa..." exclaimed Bel as she looked up at the large tower. "This is amazing... It might even be bigger than Grandmother Mia's statue..."

It was quite the...disturbing...utterance, but unfortunately, Mia was not there to hear it. Mia's soul had been saved...or perhaps not.

"Yes, it would be awfully difficult to escape from here," stated Citrina as she calmly observed the tower. She brushed its surface with her fingers before once again looking up at its length. "It's really high, and there's nothing to grip onto. Even the wolfmaster would find it hard to climb from the outside. Only Dion Alaia could handle such a fe— Ah!" Citrina caught herself. She unconsciously looked around to make sure that none had heard the name she had muttered. In fear, her eyes landed on Bel...who was grinning from ear to ear.

"Tee hee! So Rina really does—"

"N-No! Rina doesn't!" She waved her hands in front of her frantically, but Bel fought back with a smile. They were just two noble girls having some girls' talk.

Lynsha observed them with a sigh. "Rather, it seems quite easy to commit suicide here."

"Yes, I share your worry... Luckily, there are few windows that one could jump out of, and they're all barred with iron." As Abel answered her, he pointed to the tower above. A window filled with iron bars could clearly be seen.

"Oh, I see. I was thinking this was meant as a place to wait for its inmates to fall to their death," said Lynsha with a sarcastic smile. She was a former noblewoman who had pushed for a revolution with her brother. It made her sense of humor rather...dry.

"So it's a place that would force prisoners who could not be given the

death penalty to choose that option for themselves. How wicked...” Abel laughed with a bitter smile. He shrugged. “Well, I’m sure my sister is too much for even Miss Rafina to handle.”

The group continued their conversations as they headed inside the tower. Someone was waiting to greet them.

“It has been a long time, Your Highness.”

“Hello, Monica. Have you been well?”

“Yes, though I’ve been too busy to afford a chance to return to the academy for quite a while.”

It was Monica, former Wind Crow and Rafina’s current maid. After the High Priestess was captured, she had spent her time running throughout the country trying to tie up loose ends. Today, she was to wait at the tower in order to care for Abel and his crew.

“As you will be speaking with the High Priestess of the Serpents, Miss Rafina has asked that I accompany you as a precaution,” she stated, her head bowed. Then, she invited the four up the tower. After entering through its sturdy gates, they passed through the guard’s room and were greeted by a seemingly endless staircase.

“W-We’re walking up *that*?” asked Lynsha, wincing at the thought.

Bel, instead, grinned. “Lynsha...if you don’t exercise while you’re young, your knees and back are going to hurt when you’re older! You’ve been complaining about joint pain quite a lot lately.”

“Please refrain from saying such frightening things, Miss Bel.” Bel’s innocent smile had put a stab wound in Lynsha’s chest. Holding back the pain, she fired herself up and began the climb.

With each step up the lengthy staircase, they grew ever closer to the High Priestess...and Citrina’s face grew ever strained. Memories from the castle of the Serpents returned to her...memories of losing her dear friend. The fear she had felt then returned to her, and she unknowingly began to clench her fists. But then...

“Rina...” Bel stared at her with a serious scowl.

“What is it, Bel?”

Bel gave her answer in the most serious tone she could muster. “What should I call, um...Miss Valentina?”

“Hm? Um...”

“She would be my...great aunt? I suppose, then, ‘Great Aunt Valentina’ or something? No, maybe...”

Bel’s usual ditziness had released the tension from Citrina. It was only then she had realized her shoulders were so stiff. What she had lost then was now right there beside her and smiling. Thus, she had nothing to fear.

“Thank you, Bel...”

“Huh? I didn’t do anything to deserve gratitude...” Bel tilted her head.

Citrina grabbed her hand. “Let’s give the High Priestess a good kick!”

“Tee hee! You’re right! Grandmother Mia passed her kick down to me, so I’ve got to give her a good show of it!” laughed Bel. “Oh, that’s right. Rina, did you know this? If you meet a bad man, you should kick right between his legs. Like this!” Bel kicked her foot in the air with a grin. This vulgar talk, however, had Citrina suddenly frozen in her tracks.

“Um...Bel? Who did you hear that from?”

“Why, Grandmother Mia, of course!”

“I-I see. We’ll need to give her a talking to. Right, Lynsha?”

“Yes... I believe this is a story from her time in Remno, but...we best make sure she’s not teaching anything...*questionable*.” Lynsha nodded, as serious as serious can be.

Thus, it was determined that Mia would be getting a few lessons from Citrina and Lynsha. The group continued to climb for a while, similar lively talks shared between them. Then finally, they reached a heavy wooden door.

“Is everyone ready?” asked Abel, turning to look behind him. Lynsha and Bel nodded, and finally, Citrina joined them. After a deep breath, Abel opened the door. “Excuse me, sister.”

“My, Abel... You’ve come to visit again.” The voice behind the door was tinted with exasperation. “Hee hee! Gain came just three days ago. The two of you need to get over me already... I’m sure Gain won’t ever be popular with women, but are you sure you’re not putting off the girl in your heart, Abel?”

Thus, a showdown with the High Priestess began once again. However, there were none yet who knew the consequences their revenge would bring.

Chapter 32: Bel's Winning Argument

It was a quaint room that trapped Valentina Remno. The only furnishings were a bed and small desk, the Holy Book lazily thrown atop it.

"They're really quite cruel. How could they lock up the High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents with only the Holy Book to keep me company?" She laughed, taking the book into her hand. "Are they telling me to use it to stave off my boredom? Tee hee! I'd like to see how the Holy Lady would like it if I did the same thing with *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth* to her." She threw away the book and sat down on her bed. "Had they at least given me a pen and paper, I could be making copies of it... Well anyways, I have too much time on my hands, so I'm glad you visited, Abel. What brings you here today?"

That was the sight that greeted Abel as he entered the room. "I am glad to see you are well, sister. I brought someone I'd like you to meet." He took a step inside. Behind him appeared...

"My, if it isn't Rina! I never thought you would come visit me yourself," Valentina said with a laugh. "I've longed for another tea party with you. I'd love to offer you some refreshments, but I'm a prisoner, you see. I have nothing to offer you as thanks for your visit. I hope you won't mind too much."

Citrina shook her head with a sweet smile. "Greetings, High Priestess. It is not often we meet, but Rina doesn't need anything you'd have to offer. It's impossible to know what may be inside."

"My... That's quite the genuine smile you're wearing, Rina." Valentina scowled. "I thought I had stolen something precious to you, but...I see I miscalculated. I truly believed that girl was your irreplaceable best friend, but perhaps I was mistaken?" Valentina's words were provocative, an attempt to gouge straight into Citrina's heart. However, Citrina remained unperturbed. "Oh, or maybe the girl who died... Um, I believe her name was Bel?"

The moment that name left Valentina's lips, Citrina shivered. While

short-lived, it had Valentina grinning in triumph—the demeaning grin of someone who calculated to irritate.

"Bel, that girl who is now in heaven, doesn't wish for revenge. She doesn't want your hands to once again be dirtied, Rina. Instead, she wants you to be happy. So you gave up on revenge. Is that it? Heh! How wonderful. What a beautiful friendship you two have!" Valentina laughed and laughed, but then...her face stiffened.

"Wow! You really are smart, High Priestess! You're exactly right!"

"Huh?" Valentina's mouth gaped open as another girl appeared from behind Citrina. It was a girl who looked just like Bel—the girl Valentina had killed with her own hands.

However, Bel paid her no mind. As if completely unconcerned—or perhaps just too airheaded—she naturally picked up her skirt and curtsied. "It's nice to meet you, Great Aunt Valentina. My name is Miabel." She gave a daring introduction.

"How can this be? Back then, you...you..." Valentina had lost all her composure.

Bel responded to her question with a grin. "Yes, you really surprised me!" she stated, patting at her neck.

Citrina grabbed Bel's hand. "Bel is alive. So Rina doesn't need revenge. That is all. Rina won't fall for your tricks. You won't convince me to poison you." She made that declaration confidently and proudly.

For a moment, Bel looked like she wanted to scream, but she held back. "Yes, Rina's right! She's...kind? So she won't be poisoning anyone! I think!" Bel's voice, too, brimmed with confidence. She pointed her finger straight at Valentina. "Unfortunately, your plan has failed!" she exclaimed as if she was a prophet who knew the future (which she actually was).

Valentina, on the other hand, simply shrugged. She put on the wry smile of someone who was dealing with children who just wouldn't listen. "Oh...I see. Well, this changes nothing. Even should you live, and even should Rina not fall to the Serpents, we will live on. We're immortal. As long as people are people—as long as there are the weak and the strong—the Chaos Serpents will rise again."

"Well, maybe they won't die out, but..." Bel tilted her head. "Can't we just make them dormant forever?" Then, she giggled. "If they wake up, we'll sneak up from behind and go *bwam!* straight on the head. And if it's a

man, we'll kick them—"

"Bel..."

"Miss Bel..."

Citrina and Lynsha's voices interrupted. Bel closed her mouth for a moment before continuing. "Um, anyway, if the Serpents won't die, we'll just make sure they can never wake up! We'll create a world that isn't worth destroying."

"Bwah ha ha! How childish. Do you really think a dream like that could ever come true? In the whole history of humanity, none ever has."

"But I believe it will. I know someone who was able to build a world that continued my happy dream. All we have to do is protect that!"

Bel's words were full of conviction. Valentina's, on the other hand, were the words of a snake. They found a way to worm into their opponent's heart, causing them to falter, making them uncertain, and robbing them of their confidence. They were calculated, but they could never shake Bel, for she had come straight from a dreamworld. She knew that the world Mia would create was one that could keep the Serpents at bay.

"I don't know what you found in *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*. But it contains neither unchanging rules that have governed the world for all time nor are they absolutes that everyone has to bow down to." Bel did not speak her words enthusiastically, but quietly. "Grandmother Mia told me that it was natural for the people to feel dissatisfied with a negligent ruler, and that letting that just be would lead to destruction. That's why rulers always need to look out for the weak who are in danger of being taken advantage of."

"I see. Should a truly ingenious ruler appear, times may remain peaceful as long as that ruler lives on. But that is only temporary. No matter how much effort one puts in, it will not last forever."

"You're right. But, I think the people who live in that time just need to take the responsibility to work toward that themselves, to make sure the important things they inherited from the people who came before don't break apart. As long as they stay vigilant, that world will be passed onto their children, then their grandchildren! I think...that's all we can do." Once she had spoken, Bel grinned. It was as if it sparkled, lighting up the room.

"What *are* you?" muttered Valentina. It was as if she was asking herself, rather than Bel herself. "What are *you*, and just what is Mia Luna

Tearmoon? You’re strange. You’re a deviation!”

“I don’t think so at all! And if you do, I think you’re just mistaken about this world. A lot of bad things can happen, sure, but a lot of good can too. A lot that shouldn’t be broken...a lot of things that are kind and irreplaceable.” Bel puffed out her chest as she let out her words that kicked Valentina right into the air. Faced with her confidence, Valentina...was forced into silence.

Chapter 33: Mia's Teaching Philosophy: "The Wisdom of the Five-Mushroom Gratin"

"By the way, Miss Rafina. Is Julius going to be our only teacher for the SEEC program?"

"I plan for him to be the lead and for other instructors here at the academy to supplement him. However, I doubt we will be able to send much manpower to the program at the beginning."

Mia sighed. *Honestly, the only thing I really need is for Patty to be educated, so...we don't need to make this too big.* Mia looked at Patricia and sighed again.

"Is this girl one of the candidates you had in mind for the Special Education Elementary Course?"

"Hm? Why, yes. Patty, please introduce yourself to Mr. Julius."

Patty stood up at Mia's words and greeted him. "I look forward to getting to know you," he said politely with a kind smile. "She appears quite educated. Perhaps that is to be expected, because she is here in Saint-Noel's, after all." He looked as if he suddenly had remembered something. "Should I assume that the children sent from the orphanages as well have also been highly trained in manners?" He looked at Rafina, who gave a bit of a puzzled look before...looking at Mia! Having been shown deference as student council president by Rafina, Mia gave a solemn nod and...looked straight at Sion!

Mia was not hasty with her actions. After pretending to take a moment to think, she made an awe-inspiring pass. After serving as president of the student council for three years, she'd learned a thing or two.

Having silently been tasked with the responsibility of an answer, Sion responded. "Hm. It would be safest to follow precedence. I hear those are the guidelines followed at Saint Mia Academy, and I suppose we should use

them as a basis here as well."

"So we would be selecting children of outstanding talent from the orphanages to send here..." muttered Rafina with a bit of a scowl.

Is there something she doesn't like about that plan...?

Mia thought it was best to think this over a bit. She was the only one with a bit of a different priority. The only thing she was focused on was getting Patricia an education. She glanced at the girl, who was sitting politely. She had perfect manners, but Mia had...a single doubt.

The real issue is just how smart Patty is... Mia had never heard anything about her grandmother being a wunderkind, which meant her intellect was average, if not slightly below.

If we went with that plan, I'd be instilling a sense of inferiority in my grandmother. Mia's image of a skilled commoner was Ludwig. What if—emphasis on *if*—you had to study in an academy full of Ludwigs? That would be terrible. The worst thing imaginable.

If she was surrounded by that stupid four-eyes all day—not to mention those derisive glares he'd be sending her—she wouldn't be able to take it! I *wouldn't be able to take it!*

The Ludwig of now was fine, but being surrounded by the Ludwig that always used to get on her tail? Just the thought of it sent shivers down her spine. While Patricia wasn't one to wear her emotions outwardly, it could be assumed she felt the same things as everyone else. Which meant that if Mia wasn't careful here, she could warp Patricia's personality. She could create a gap the Serpents could slither into.

Mia wanted to avoid that at all costs. Thus, she opened her mouth, speaking in the tone of a philosopher who knew all the secrets this world had to offer. "I believe it would be best...for us to let average children enter the Special Education Elementary Course. There is pain that can come from making a divide between those who excel in their studies and those who do not. Of course, there is no need to bring those who have no interest in education here, but I believe there is no need to limit admittees to those who show particular promise."

Having said all that, Mia got a bit nervous. She was completely surrounded by teacher's pets, so she doubted whether they would understand her position.

Well, I do quite well with my studies too. I'm just...imagining what Bel

must feel like.

As Mia lost herself in some rather presumptuous thoughts, there was one who voiced their agreement—none other than future teacher Julius himself.

"Indeed... A famous teacher once said that children are like wheat. It is impossible to know what will become of wheat you never bother to grow. Only if you take the time to raise it will you learn if it's a hearty rye or simple chaff. Those words are meant to argue for the possibilities that exist within every child."

The abilities of one in childhood should not serve as a basis for judgments. It is only through seeing the results of their education that one can determine the true talent one has to offer. Julius was proclaiming this as his teaching philosophy.

"Yes, you're absolutely right..." Having heard all that, Mia mostly agreed, but she still had some unease. Thus, she added to his words. "But I would like to add this: people are not wheat; there are none who are born as chaff."

She made sure to push that point! Mia's real responsibility here was educating Patricia. And what would you get if you applied those words to the Serpents? You would be saying that there is no way of knowing if someone could be a Serpent unless you try to raise them into one, so let's try it on everyone! Without Mia's adjustment, it sounded as if he was saying we should nip all possible future sources of danger in the bud.

"What fruits will come of their labor is dependent on their education, no?" Or rather, if that's *not* how it is, it would be bad for Mia, so she was just trying to get him to concede that. As princess of high-powered gazes, she made high-powered eye contact. Then, she looked around the room to once again confirm her stance and...found everyone to be in seemingly deep agreement!

"Mia certainly has a point," Sion said with a nod.

"I agree. We shouldn't put too much emphasis on possible admittees' current academic achievements," muttered Rafina in deep thought.

The others...were gazing at Mia in respect. It. Felt. *Good*.

Oho ho! A tasty lunch really does get my brain working well. That five-mushroom gratin was so tasty. It had the perfect texture, the cheese was toasted perfectly, and it was just excellent. Ah... Memory of it alone is making my stomach happy.

While Mia was lost in her superfluous thoughts, the conversation had been moving forward.

“Mia...? Mia? Is something wrong?”

“Huh...?” When she came to, Rafina was giving her a puzzled stare.

Ah! This is bad!

Having been taken by surprise, Mia was a bit flustered. And of course, she couldn’t just be honest and say she was spacing out thinking about food. Mia took a moment of silence to consider what lies she could come up with...and decided to just praise the meal! Rafina couldn’t be angry while hearing about how tasty the food at Saint-Noel was.

“Miss Rafina, have you already had your lunch?”

“No, not yet...”

“In that case, you must try the five-mushroom gratin.”

“Oh! Tee hee! I actually had that made especially for you. I hear that mushrooms are quite good for you as well.”

“Moons, really? Thank you. I enjoyed it thoroughly.” Mia continued as if spellbound. “How excellent that it uses five different mushrooms with completely different textures. They truly considered the bite and thickness of each mushroom to find the most delicious shape to cut them in.” A thought suddenly occurred to Mia. “Yes, the mushrooms are children, and those who cook them are us... Doesn’t that perfectly describe the concept of ‘education’?”

“Did you mention...cooking mushrooms?” Keithwood’s chair clattered as he clamored to his feet. Mia didn’t quite understand what the heck he was on about so...she ignored him.

“Each child is different. They each are born with different talents, and thus, take different shapes once they are grown. Still, they remain mushrooms meant to be eaten. I believe our most important task is considering their shape to prepare them as deliciously as we can.”

That declaration had Mia gloating inside. *I really made my way out of that one! I brilliantly hid how I was thinking about food during our conversation! I was even able to come up with an excuse as to why we shouldn’t abandon Patty, since we still don’t know how bright she truly is. It’s just like the famous saying: “Those who chase two hares are led to mushrooms.”*

...This famous saying was actually made up by Mia. It spoke of how two merits could be obtained through a single action.

Chapter 34: Sympathy, Grief, and Hope

I...panicked there. So Princess Mia was *up to her usual metaphors,* Keithwood thought as he glanced at Mia giving a fulfilled laugh. Pretending as if nothing was wrong, he sunk back into his chair and let out a deep sigh. *It would have been the end of me had she suggested cooking mushrooms.*

He already had to take on the final boss that was Rafina. If Mia had decided to get up to some fungus burning, surrender would have been his only option. Not only did he have to fight two wolves single-handed, but Dion Alaia had joined the fray on the enemy's side. That was how cornered he was with despair.

Well, give it any proper thought and it becomes clear that this is not the worst of circumstances. Having to take Lady Rafina under my arm isn't too hopeless of a situation. To think I would lose my composure like this. I am being too pessimistic, as there is hope Lady Rafina could be a better cook than Princess Mia and the others.

Just after he had been asked to help her make the sandwiches, Rafina had summoned him, where she *herself* said, "It may be hard to fill sandwiches made with horse-shaped bread." In that moment, Keithwood had found a ray of hope. Given what she said, she must undoubtedly have made sandwiches before. Had she not, she wouldn't have considered how well the contents would fit inside. Thus, she must be experienced in sandwich making! At least, he prayed for that outcome...but his faint hope proved fleeting.

I may have a much easier time than when I've had to face down against Princess Mia. Emphasis on may.

...Keithwood, at his core, was a realist.

When he had faced down against those wolves seasoned through battle, he had not been optimistic about his hopes for victory. He simply observed thoroughly and took the best course of action he could find. That was the kind of man he was. He well knew the folly of surrendering yourself to hope, and yet...this time, he clung to hope with everything he had. His

instincts were telling him that this was the path that would keep his heart most at peace.

In any case, Princess Mia truly never changes, he muttered to himself as a distraction before returning his eyes to Mia. She had been speaking of the selection criteria for her SEEC program.

She asks not of the country, nor of the quality of talent...she simply will not allow that talent to go unnourished. This is the same sentiment she conveyed to Prince Abel during the Swordsmanship Tournament.

Without discrimination or distinction, she viewed each person as a single human. She saw the possibilities that lay within them, and she would not let that wilt unblossomed. *That* was her philosophy. It could be seen within Saint Mia Academy, but with that idea now polished, it was to be brought to life again here in Saint-Noel.

A virtuous king promotes those of praiseful talent. There is joy to be found in living under such a ruler, bettering oneself to gain recognition and reap rewards. At least, it is much better than not being recognized for one's efforts at all...but once their talent is gone, so is the king's favor. Under such a way of life, one must always live in fear of that moment.

Having been adopted by King Abram and raised as a sibling to Sion, Keithwood understood that feeling well. He knew the kind of people the king and queen were. He loved, respected, and trusted them. Yet still, at the instinctual level, the fear of one day being abandoned for a lapse in his judgment had been carved deep into his heart. It was why he trained so diligently with the sword, continuing to polish his skills.

It is thanks to this that I have been so studious with my training...but Princess Mia assuredly thinks differently...

That was undoubtedly the truth behind her metaphor of the five-mushroom gratin. Mia was not in search of particular talent, nor did she place any attention on the level of talent. Even in mediocrity, she sought to leverage those skills to their full ability, and she claimed it to be the responsibility of those who sat at the top. If the people were mushrooms, it was her job as ruler to appraise their taste and cook them into a fine dish. Aware of both the good and bad, she was to find the best life they could live and grant it to them. That was the answer Mia had offered.

There are assuredly those who foster their talents out of fear of abandonment. But Princess Mia is the opposite. She instead seeks to bestow

blessings so that they may one day be returned to her in full. She seeks to prepare a place for everyone to be the best versions of themselves, where they can work to their fullest.

Mia's position was offering the greatest of blessings to be returned with loyalty and the best one had to offer. It had Keithwood sighing in awe.

Indeed, she has the makings of a virtuous ruler. No, she goes beyond that...

Awe at Mia's boundless magnanimity filled Keithwood's entire being...but he still couldn't help but think: *If only a small portion of her talent had been allocated toward cooking... No, nobody is perfect. And while I understand that...*

Imagining his tutoring session with Rafina, Keithwood couldn't help but look toward the heavens.

Keithwood had no idea that had he followed Mia's example and relied on others...he would find some unexpected aid. It would be a short while longer until he learned that Rafina's maid Monica somewhat knew her way around a kitchen.

Chapter 35: Insomniac Mia (at Least, by Mia Standards) Laments

Having finished up their discussions, the student council meeting ended. After washing away the satisfying tiredness of a day's work in the bath and fulfilling her stomach and tongue with a tasty dinner and dessert, Mia collapsed into her bed.

"Fwaaah... That was quite the worthwhile meeting. It seems that Julius will be a reliable teacher."

She recalled his kind...*bespectacled*...face. *Those glasses of his are really relieving for some reason. I'll be able to leave Patty in his care without any worries...* Feeling assured, she slowly closed her eyes. *But...can I?* She suddenly felt like something was off, and it had her eyes shooting back open. *He really did seem quite reliable, and he's ignorant of the Serpents. My true focus here is not giving Patty the best education I can but saving her from the teachings of the Serpents. Which means I can't just leave it all up to him...* Mia groaned. *And if I really,* really *think about it, he used to be a Tearmoon noble.*

She wasn't too pleased with that fact, for Mia had a hard time trusting those of that category. In the previous timeline, it was rare for Mia to come across any worth placing her trust in. To Mia, the distrust inspired by the term "Tearmoon Noble" was enough to supersede the authority of glasses.

He said his house is no longer, but I can't afford to let my guard down. The best thing to do would be some research... Yes, that's right.

Mia had hit upon a good idea. She called out to Patty, who was sleeping on the bed beside her. "Patty, are you still awake?"

"...Fwuh? What is it, Miss Mia?" She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"There's something I wish to ask you."

Coincidentally, Anne was out making preparations to sleep. To make sure that Mia didn't have to walk to the dining hall in the middle of the night should she awaken thirsty (not that Mia was afraid of being in the

dark dining hall alone, or anything. That was nothing to Mia and it wasn't scary at all...) she had gone off to collect water, and she needed to exchange pleasantries with the dining staff. There was a lot that personal maids needed to do before bed.

In any case, Mia and Patricia were currently alone in the room. Thus, Mia thought it would be fine to discuss things that were a bit more...risky.

"In fact, why don't you join me in my bed, Patty? Let's chat for a bit."

"Understood." After a moment, Patricia slipped into Mia's bed. "What do you want to chat about?" The pale light of the moon reflected off her troubled face.

"I wanted to discuss the meeting from earlier with you. Have you heard the name Overadt before?"

The house might have fallen now, but that shouldn't have been the case in the time Patricia had come from. Thus, Mia thought she would have at least heard some rumors...and she ended up hitting a bull's-eye.

"Yes. I've...heard of them," gulped Patricia.

This had Mia grinning. *Oho! How convenient! I can ask about what kind of family they were!*

"Is this a test?" Patricia's voice interrupted Mia's grin.

"My, a test...?" Mia looked puzzled, but Patricia responded flatly.

"Viscount Overadt is a lecherous man. His weakness is beautiful women, and it is easy to control him through lust. He is particularly fond of women with black hair, and he frequently impregnates the low-class women who work for him. Thus, there are issues regarding his inheri—"

"S-S-Stop right there, Patty!" Hearing the word "impregnate" from such a young girl had thrown Mia into a bit of a panic. "Wh-Who did you hear that from?"

"Hm? My teacher."

"Y-Your teacher...? Oh, of House Clausius," muttered Mia. She once again felt the horror that was the Chaos Serpents.

I have heard that the Serpents are particularly skilled at controlling people's hearts but...they've thoroughly investigated the personalities of all of Tearmoon's nobles, I see. This is quite foreboding...

The Serpents research their victims carefully so that they can control Tearmoon—and people—entirely. Their thoroughness once again caught Mia off guard.

The Yellowmoons weren't Serpents themselves, but people shackled by the grudges of the first emperor. However, it seems like the Serpents have wormed their way deeper into the Clausiuses... Since the Chaos Serpents aren't a proper organization with a leader, there isn't too much to be surprised about there, but...

"Am I correct, Miss Mia?" Mia suddenly found Patty staring up at her. There was a bottomless darkness in her eyes, and it had Mia shuttering.

"Y-Yes. That's right. Excellent job, Patty."

"I see... Thank goodness." Patty sighed, and for a moment, her face relaxed, revealing relief. She once again stared at Mia. "Is that it? Can I go back to bed now?"

"Yes, of course. Sleep tight."

With that, Patricia lowered her head. She wore no smile. "Good night, Miss Mia." She stood up, graciously taking the hem of her nightgown in her hand and curtsying before returning to her bed. Mia watched as she left.

I wonder just how Patty was treated back home... Then there's the matter of Julius. It seems I shouldn't completely leave Patty up to him. Ugh... I've got even more to think about.

Mia was in for a sleepless night.

It should be noted that once Anne had returned to the room after a short while, Mia was deep, deep asleep.

Side Chapter: Princess Mia Be a Roaring Flame

“Not all can conduct themselves as Mia Luna Tearmoon does.”

“Unfortunately, our lord is not Her Highness Mia Luna Tearmoon.”

These are famous words meant to lament the shortcomings of nobles, set phrases spoken time and time again by those who have resigned to their fates. According to history books, it was a saint of the Central Orthodox Church, Yorgos the Cynic, who had first spoken those words. However, the same books speak not of what prompted them.

This is the story of a priest and a pair of siblings—a story unknown to history.

Two children raced down a narrow alleyway in Ganudos Port Country. The stench of rotting garbage was cloying. The girl waved her arms and legs in the air as if trying to rid herself of either the stench or the malice in the air.

“Hurry, Kiryl!” the young girl cried, turning back to face the other child. “They’ll snag ya if you don’t!” She wore tatters, and behind her unkempt bangs was a jaded glare unbefitting someone her age.

“W-Wait, Yanna!”

A young boy, also dressed in rags, followed after her. While the girl looked to be about ten, the boy was even younger. They were a pair of siblings, young enough to still need the care of their parents. But right now, a large man was barreling after them.

“Stop right there, ya brats!”

His voice was deep and restrained with anger. His face, adorned with a scraggly beard, was the countenance of a thug...to most kids, it would be traumatic just to be yelled at by a guy like him. Coincidentally, this menacing man was a fisherman who had worked in the industry for twenty years. He was a skilled veteran and a proper businessman.

However, this chase scene soon reached a rather underwhelming end.

"Eek!" The younger brother, Kiryl, tripped. He fell to the ground.

"Kiryl! Dammit... Agh!" The elder sister, Yanna, rushed to help him up. But pain quickly shot down her arm, eliciting a scream.

"I've got ya now, ya damn brats."

Her thin arm was now twisted in the air. From it dropped two fish.

"You've got guts, stealing my goods like that..."

"Let go of my sister!" Kiryl attempted to tackle the fisherman, but unfortunately, there was no way a young kid could get one over on a sturdy seaman. In a fit of rage, the man tossed Kiryl aside.

"C-Cut that out! Don't ya dare lay a hand on Kiryl!" Yanna flapped her arms and legs in the air, but the fisherman simply laughed.

"Hah! I see the thieving brat's got quite the mouth on her." The man raised an arm in the air and formed a fist. Yanna closed her eyes and braced for impact. But then...she was saved by an unexpected source.

"The Holy Deity loves his children and shows them benevolence. You are brave to beat a child in front of His house," came a gentle voice.

Yanna fearfully peered open her eyes to find a man who personified sullenness. He was lanky, and he wore the black robes of priests. He walked over to the dumpster, rescuing Kiryl from it before he once again returned his gaze to the fisherman.

"My apologies, father. I didn't expect to find a church in this garbage dump..." The fisherman chuckled.

The priest shrugged with a sigh. "The nobles are not a fan of my cynicism, and I believe it is 'garbage dumps' that are most in need of moral guidance anyway... Well, there are also those of high status who could be said to have hearts of garbage dumps..." After that incendiary remark, the priest put his hands together and looked toward Yanna. "So, what crime have these children committed?"

"Ya can't tell just by lookin' at 'em? They're thieves, father."

The fisherman violently tugged up Yanna's bangs. She gritted her teeth. She knew exactly what would be revealed on her forehead. It was an indelible mark of their roots left on both her and her brother—a tattoo in the shape of an eye.

Seeing it, the priest scowled. "The Mark of the Third Eye. They are pirates, then..."

A seafaring people once called the area around Ganudos Port Country their home. However, they were wiped out, and the small, separated clusters that still survived were treated like mere pirates. But once, they had been a unified race. In their culture, it was custom to mark their foreheads with a tattoo of an eye, and it served as a visual representation of the bond between the parent who carved the mark and the child who received it. However, now that the people had scattered, it simply served as the disdainful symbol that marked them as children of pirates.

"That is not a sin for these children to bear," said the priest. The fisherman shook his head, looking completely fed up.

"The sons of thieves are thieves! I work hard to catch m' fish, and these thieves snatched 'em!"

The priest glanced at Yanna's feet. Two dried fish were lying on the floor.

"I see. How much did they cost?"

"Whoa there, father. Ya better think twice about this. Once a thief, always a thief. They'll just do it again."

"In that case, I ask you to give them the same punishment next time. Somewhere *I* can't see, mind you. A priest can't just turn a blind eye to the suffering children he comes across." The priest gave an exasperated sigh and handed the fisherman some money.

"I see it ain't easy being a priest either."

"It is nothing. I'm just particularly fond of fish." The priest picked the fish off the floor and glared at the fisherman. "So, can I have you release those two now?"

As soon as the fisherman let go of her arm, Yanna bolted straight for Kiryl. He stared blankly back up at her, but it still had Yanna letting out a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness you're not hurt..."

"Hey, brats." The two looked up to find the priest glaring at them.

Yanna scowled. "We didn't need yer damn meddling! And we're not brats!"

The priest's tone was still sullen. "If you want to be treated like a proper lady, you best do something about that mouth of yours. Anyway..." His face grew even more sullen as he stared at the two fish in his hand. "I bought these fish. How do you plan to repay me?"

“Whaddya mean?” asked Yanna.

The priest scowled at her. “I hate fish. Well, not completely, but I can’t stand eating them, at least. As a servant of the Holy Deity, I cannot let food go to waste. So you’ll be eating these as recompense. Don’t run away.”

With that, the priest headed back into his dilapidated church. Yanna reluctantly followed after. She spent the whole day there. Having been fed a feast of fish, she received a bath, a change of clothes, and even a shabby bed.

“Is this one of those orphanages I’ve heard about?”

Aside from Yanna and her brother, there were other solitary children in the church. Despite having no family relation, those of the church gave them food and clothes. The churchgoers raised these children for no benefit of their own. It was the exact kind of pure philanthropy that Yanna so mistrusted.

Adults were not to be believed, and neither were children; that was Yanna’s creed. Thus, even should the grumpy priest force them out the next day, it wouldn’t hurt her. This had happened again and again. She wouldn’t be disappointed, but...she would still want to give him a mouthful.

“I thought you were gonna trap us here. This is an orphanage, yeah?” grumbled Yanna.

The priest chuckled. “Did you think you could stay here? Unfortunately, that’s not the case.”

“Because we’ve got the Third Eye?”

“Yes, that would be correct.”

Such bluntness didn’t hurt Yanna. The belief that the church would help —that they would be given food and a safe bed to sleep in—was too good to be true. Rather, she was relieved that she had not been sold off into slavery. She went through no hardships here. She was not beaten, and she even got a meal and a good night’s rest. She was lucky.

I knew all adults were good-for-nothings... It’s fine. I won’t rely on ’em. That way, they can’t betray me.

The priest handed Yanna a piece of parchment. “I’m having you two head for the Holy Principality of Belluga.”

“Ya want us to go to Belluga?” Yanna looked confused.

The priest just shook his head as if this was all a major pain. “Yes. I’ve been asked to send children there to attend an academy. Most of the

children here have deep ties to this place. It'd be better for them to stay here even after they're old enough to take care of themselves."

"So we showed up right when ya needed us."

"I suppose. It's hard for you to live here in this land, no?"

"And just why d'ya think we'll just go along with whatever you say?!" Yanna glared at him.

"Well, you can do whatever you want. But the next time a fisherman catches you, don't think any convenient help will come to save you right when you need it."

His words were cold and sharp. Yanna bit her lip in frustration, but she still did as she was told, for there was truth to his words. It would be hard for her and her brother to live in Ganudos Port Country...so if a priest was willing to send them away, she'd use that opportunity.

"Fine. Whatever you say." Yanna nodded.

The priest's only response was an introspective "Hm..."

Yanna had to protect her brother on her own. Had she let her guard down and been betrayed, she wasn't the only one who'd have to face the consequences—her brother would be done for as well. Thus...she firmly closed off her heart.

Thus, she hadn't noticed that the priest was terrible with words and even worse when it came to dealing with children. That was actually the kindest he got, and he was trying *hard* for it. It would only be after she had started her life at Saint-Noel that she would one day come to realize this.

A few days later, a priest received a letter from Saint-Noel. The letter was addressed to the famously sullen Yorgos, and it is uncertain what exactly was written there. What we do know is that the moment he read it, his cynical face softened into a calm smile.

Chapter 36: Mia’s Foreboding and a Far-Off Advisor

The Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, was not poor with mornings. She was an early sleeper and an early riser, living each day to the same tune. This was all thanks to the hard work of her loyal maid Anne, who would not allow Mia to fall to laziness.

Thus, having awoken from her slumber, Mia let out a big yawn and lifted her arms up as she stretched in bed. Then, she was faced with her first choice of the day: would she begin by getting dressed, or would she treat herself to a morning bath?

“Hmph...”

First, she patted her clothes. Then, she patted her stomach. She had determined her level of hunger! And the results...were bearable. She had no need to dress and rush to the dining hall! Which meant...

“I didn’t have any night sweats, but today’s special,” muttered Mia as Anne returned to the room.

“Ah! Good morning, milady!”

“Greetings, Anne. Isn’t it a wonderful morning?” Mia chuckled. “I was about to head for the baths. Could you get things ready for me?”

Anne responded with a vigorous nod. “Yes, I already have.” She held up everything Mia would need: a fluffy towel, a change of clothes, Mia’s favorite shampoo, and soap. She also had a satchel of oils to rub onto Mia’s skin.

“My, you’re well prepared.”

“Since I knew today was special, I thought you’d want to start it off with a wash.”

The sight of her loyal retainer, perfectly aware of Mia’s thoughts and feelings as if she could read her mind, earned a satisfied nod from Mia. Then, she looked toward Patricia, who was still snoozing away in her bed.

“In that case, let’s wait a bit longer to wake Patty and then head for the

baths!”

Yes, today was a special day. It was the momentous occasion that the students of the Special Elementary Education Course would be welcomed into Saint-Noel Academy.

Just fifteen days after the meeting with the student council, Holy Lady Rafina’s ordinance had been spread to all corners of the continent through the fastest of messenger horses. However, given the contents, many did not meet it with enthusiasm. While they might have agreed with the principle of providing orphans and the children of commoners with a quality education, the mention of “Saint-Noel Academy” inspired scruples. Thus, the first SEEC class contained only six students.

“With Patty, that makes seven. Well, that sounds like a good enough number...”

“Good morning, Miss Mia.” Patricia awoke as if she had overheard Mia and Anne’s conversation. She rubbed her eyes with her hands and let out a big yawn.

“Good morning, Patty. We’re going to wash off our nighttime sweat. Could you get ready?”

“Understood.” With a nod, she skillfully began to prepare her own change of clothes. It elicited a groan from Mia.

There really is something off about this girl...

With Mia still racking her brain, the two headed off to the bath. There were many doubts that Mia had about Patty, and her bathing habits were one of them—she was capable of disrobing and washing herself. While she had borrowed Anne’s help at the beginning, she now completed all these tasks on her own. The only thing she couldn’t do was wash her own hair. Anne went to go help her, but Mia stopped her with a raise of her hand.

“It’s fine, Anne. I’ll take care of it.”

With that, Mia merrily squirted some shampoo onto her hands. And yes, it was her favorite *horse* shampoo. She rubbed it between her palms to create bubbles. Then, she applied it to Patricia’s hair and rinsed it away. All the while, Patricia squeezed her eyes shut and froze. With her still as a statue, her hair was incredibly easy to wash.

“Oho ho! This feels just like washing a horse’s hair!”

While Mia was just speaking of her experiences in the Horsemanship

Club, she was also getting ever closer to the secret of the horse shampoo!

But anyway, Mia was beset with the same thoughts as she washed Patricia's hair. *There really is something strange about her.*

This sense of mismatch Mia got about Patty could most easily be boiled down to her being *accustomed* to certain things. She could easily disrobe and wash herself. The women of major noble houses rarely did this. Instead, they had a maid lend them aid. Due to Mia's previous experiences, she believed it was important to be able to do things for oneself, and thus, did that to the best degree she could. But even she borrowed Anne's aid in the bath.

However, Patricia did it all alone as if it was natural. To her, it was as simple as it had been for Bel, who had been raised in the slums. She showed no qualms...except for *once*. The first time Mia had seen her enter the bath, she wore a puzzled face as if she was thinking, "Is it weird for a noble girl to do this?"

But that reaction was strange in and of itself. A girl born into a noble household would never have to consider what was or wasn't noblelike. The actions would have naturally been subsumed into her.

In that case, perhaps Patty wasn't born as a noble.

At the end of the day, Mia didn't know a lot about her grandmother. They had never met, and she had no meetings or other relations with House Clausius at all. Thus, she knew little about Patty's origins and the environment she had been raised in.

Father's never told me any of this. Maybe I should get Ludwig to look into it?

Just as Mia had sunk herself in the bathtub and let out a big sigh, Patricia had come to ask her a question. "By the way, Miss Mia—is our bath this morning preparation for welcoming the rest of the Special Elementary Education Course?"

"Yes, that's right. It's only proper manners for us to clean ourselves before welcoming them."

"But the SEEC program is for commoner children. Is it not weird for a noble like me to welcome them so politely? Is there really a need for me to study alongside them?" Patty hung her head in doubt, but Mia responded with a smile.

"Of course. No matter the person, those of true high class make an effort

to greet them properly. Plus, having knowledge of commoners will be instrumental in you becoming the wife of the emperor."

"That doesn't sound right..." Patty looked puzzled.

Mia retained her kind smile. "Patty, this is important if you want to become a Chaos Serpent. Knowing the hearts of the people is very important, right? As a Serpent, of course."

Hearing all that, Patty's response was... "Yes, understood." She gave an obedient nod.

Moons, as soon as I mention the Serpents, she'll listen to anything I say! Convenient as it may be, I don't think it's a good idea to keep things this way.

This fact had become another source of worry for Mia—just when should she reveal that she wasn't a Chaos Serpent?

My plan of tricking her into thinking she's learning the way of the Serpents to instead teach her upstanding behavior has gone well so far, but... She couldn't just continue to lie to her. She had to find the right time to come clean. *What worries me most is the fact that if I tell her it's for the sake of becoming a Serpent, she'll listen to anything I say...*

Mia didn't quite understand why, but Patty seemed dead set on becoming a Serpent. In order to avoid getting the carpet pulled out from under her, Mia felt she needed to understand why...at least, that's what her gut was telling her.

I haven't had any weird dreams lately, but I can't let my guard down! For now, I'll have to approach cautiously. Mia let out a troubled sigh. *I hope Abel returns soon... I haven't been out for a long ride on horseback lately. It's been getting me down.*

Coincidentally, the person able to give Mia some much-needed advice in this situation would have been Citrina. Had Mia asked her about Patricia, she would have undoubtedly said, "Hasn't Patricia been threatened by the Serpents? That's why she feels she must listen to them."

However, it would be a little longer until Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon, currently off to visit Valentina, would return to Saint-Noel.

Chapter 37: Princess Mia Longs to Be...Candy

Thanks to Anne's vigorous efforts, Mia had been transformed into the beautiful student council president she was, and Patricia was all tidied up. After the two finished their breakfasts, they headed for the student council room. It was there that they would be greeting the new students.

After convening with the rest of the student council, they waited. Finally, a nun came, escorting the six children. Their faces were frozen and their nerves obvious. They looked about the room, and Mia watched as she recalled the paperwork she had read over earlier.

According to the documents I received, there should be two boys and one girl who are ten years old, the same age as Patty. The girl's younger brother is seven, and then there are two girls who are eight...I think.

The ten-year-old children were the eldest, and there were four of them including Patty. Then, there were three who were younger at seven and eight years of age. And just to be clear, Mia had remembered their names as well. Mia knew *exactly* how much damage would be done had she needed to ask, "Um, who were you again?" Still, she knew not of their faces, and she looked between them eagerly waiting to figure out who was who.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. My name is Mia Luna Tearmoon, and I'm this academy's student council president and princess of the Tearmoon Empire." Mia stuck out her chest! "I look forward to getting to know you all."

And finished with the perfect smile of a princess. Yes, perfect! Perfect!!!

The boys' faces turned red while the girls swooned. Mia was skilled at putting on appearances. For one, there was no price tag on a smile and some kind words, and if winning over some favor was *free*, it'd be a waste not to take advantage of the opportunity.

Of course, Mia had the knowledge of a ruler—she knew the phrase "being looked down by one's people is worse than being hated by them."

The theory of rulership that had been passed down from times of old in Tearmoon was that it was better to be feared than loved. But at the same time...Mia knew exactly where that path would lead them. She was well aware of the fates of those who stuck to that axiom.

While being feared may be effective when you have the power to back it, it's a double-edged sword that proves lethal the moment the grasp you have weakens.

Mia wasn't convinced that she'd be able to keep a hold on her power all the time. Mia knew what it was like to fall to ruin. Thus, she always made sure she budgeted for contingencies.

In other words, what you need is balance. A diet of only sweets is bad for the body, but if you only filled your mouth with bitter medicine, life would lose its flavor. It's best to eat everything—but in a balanced *way.*

When plates were placed before her, Mia would skip from one to the other, twirling in the shape of the full moon. It was a balanced affair, starring Mia's novel balanced dieting technique! In fact, her invention of "Pleniluneating" was one of the many famous feats of Tearmoon's Great Sage.

Well, to return to the topic at hand, the children standing before Mia now were possible Serpent reserves. In other words, they distrusted nobles and the crown, were dissatisfied, and lived a life of poverty that they saw no hope of ever escaping. Children who had been oversupplied with fear, so to speak. Thus, in the name of balance...Mia would shower them with sweet love!

Rather than brandishing my power and instilling fear in them, I want to instill comradery so they'll come save me once my power is gone!

She'd leave being feared to the other nobles. If she could get them in line, that should be enough to fill her fear gauge! The ideal here was Mia being loved and admired *alone*. That was the style of ruling Mia adhered to. Incidentally, subduing the nobles was thanks to the instrumental actions of Ludwig and the rest of the Empress Faction, but anyway...

After Mia had showered the children with goodwill, she looked between all their faces and once again began to speak. "Well then, why don't we all introduce ourselves?" Suddenly, Mia noticed that the two children leading the pack had bangs so long they obscured their faces. "My, I see you two have quite lengthy bangs. If it gets in your eyes, it'll be a hindrance to your

studies. It's best you cut it and—" Mia reached out to the girl closest to her.

"D-Don't touch me!" The girl smacked Mia's hand away. Mia reflexively pulled it back with a groan.

"Just what do you think you're doing!" The blood had rushed from the nun's face. She hurried over and yanked the girl's arm.

"Oh, this is nothing! She hasn't done anything to deserve..."

"No, princess. I will not excuse such insolence." It seemed the nun had yet to adjust to the ways of Saint-Noel. Fear and anxiety filled her countenance. "Those who have blundered deserve punishment."

"There's no need to take it so—"

"I disagree. It is for the sake of the children that we punish and scold them when they do wrong. Please let me provide a proper punishment." The nun's face was serious, and Mia couldn't help but groan.

"A punishment, is it?" Mia looked toward the girl, who was biting her lip in frustration as her brother watched her in worry.

If the punishment is harsh, it will only provide an opportunity for the Serpents to slither in. We should refrain from spankings or anything else too extreme. Oh...that's it!

Mia had a flash of inspiration. "Yes, you're correct. As punishment for hitting my hand away, I will have you be program leader of the Special Elementary Education Course."

Just as the school needed a student council president and the dorms needed a dorm leader, the SEEC program needed a program leader who could get all the students in line. Given the ages of the kids, it was only natural to pick one of the older ones. The seven- and eight-year-olds just weren't cut out for it.

While there is a chance one of the boys would be chosen, as many believe Patty and I to be related, it's most likely they would choose her...

They were offering education in order to eradicate any possible future Serpents. Could they allow Patricia, who had been educated by the Serpents already, to serve that role? Of course not! Thus...Mia made her first move before the game had even begun.

"Huh? You for real...?" The girl lifted her lips into a sneer that looked unfitting on a child. It was the grin of a twisted adult, as if she was ridiculing Mia. "Are ya blind? Can't see this?" The girl lifted up her bangs, baring her forehead to the whole world. On it was an eye etched in black

ink.

“My, so that’s what’s under there. But...what is it?” Mia tilted her head and stared at the strange tattoo.

“There’s not a soul in Ganudos who doesn’t know what this is! It’s the mark of the Visalians...I mean, pirates!”

“Pirates...?”

“Yup, *pirates*. That’s what me and my brother’s parents were! Ya really gonna let a pirate like me be class leader?”

Mia dismissed her derisive grin with a shake of her head. “I’m not a fan of that kind of thinking, letting the sins of parents pass to their children, the sins of forefathers onto their progeny...”

This was a worldview Mia had denied time and time again. For one thing, tracing back that logic...resulted in *Mia* having to atone for the sins of Tearmoon’s first emperor...and that was something Mia wanted to avoid at all costs.

Thus, Mia looked straight into the girl’s eyes. “No matter who your parents are, you are you. Do you understand?”

As those words left her mouth, Mia hit upon something else. This was not just an act of her own self-justification, but a message to Patricia. Patricia’s wish to become a Serpent may be because her parents were. If her parents were Serpents, becoming one would have obviously been instilled upon her as a necessity.

If that was the case—if that was the reason Patricia was so hell-bent on becoming a Serpent—Mia needed to deny that necessity. Therefore, these were her words. “If you wish to become a bandit and do evil, then that is worthy of criticism and something that must be corrected. However...it doesn’t matter to me what blood runs in your veins at all.” Mia took a step backward. “Let me declare this formally. From now on, you are the leader of the SEEC program. Fulfilling that role is the punishment for the discourtesy you showed me.”

The girl simply stared at Mia as if she couldn’t believe her ears.

Chapter 38: The Great Sage of the Empire Attempts to Buy Great Power with Gold!

After leaving the tour of the school grounds to Julius and the nun, Mia convened a meeting.

"Given their number, I believe Julius alone should be enough to teach them," concluded Mia.

Yes, Mia realized leaving all the educating to Julius would probably be fine. He seemed like an intelligent man capable of handling both mathematics and language arts without issue, and as such, ought to have been capable of teaching the basics without any extra help.

But that left the issue of ethics and morals—the education necessary to keep them from being tainted by the Serpents.

"Would it be all right to leave that to you, Miss Rafina?" Mia phrased it like a question, but there was a firm message behind her words... That being, "I'm leaving it all up to you!" And of course, Mia was confident Rafina would graciously accept that request. It was the Holy Lady *herself* that Mia was speaking to. Preaching morals should be a piece of cake to her! Thus, Mia asked the question for mere confirmation, and of course Rafina was happily nodding her head in affirmation...except she wasn't.

"Huh? You'd like me to?" In fact, she seemed rather taken aback.

H-Huh? How strange. I wasn't expecting this response...

As the confusion began to creep into Mia's face, Rafina gave her a slight scowl. "I would give my all in taking on any task you might ask of me. However, this is a heavy ask after hearing you regale your teaching philosophies just the other day. I was certain *you* would take that role yourself..."

"...Huh? By 'the other day,' just what exactly—"

"Your speech about the five-mushroom gratin, of course. You used that

example to illustrate how we should treat children, and I was very moved by your words...”

Mia finally recalled the event in question. *Oh, that’s right. I really managed to say something kind of great there...* Mia panically looked at the rest of the present members. *Eek! Everyone looks like they were thinking the same thing! That I would do it!*

As Sion was the embodiment of justice and equality, Mia was sure that he’d be rushing to volunteer himself. But that couldn’t be further from the truth.

“O-Oh, um, but would Sion or Miss Rafina not be a better candidate? Right, Sion? Don’t you need to instill the values of justice and equality that Sunkland...” Mia desperately tried to foist the task onto Sion, but...

“I could do nothing to help my brother, and yet you would suggest I play a role in these children’s education? I can think of nothing more presumptuous.” He spoke his words like a sulking puppy.

Uuugh... I see he’s still hung up on what happened with Prince Echard. Sion is *quite responsible for the situation, but still...*

With the biggest faces of the student council refusing the role, Mia naturally couldn’t ask it of anyone else. The only future she envisioned were big fat “no”s. Thus...

“W-Well then, as unworthy as I may be, I will take the task of educating them in issues of morals upon myself.”

She took on the hassle, swallowing her tears.

“How troublesome...” Mia sighed. She had returned to her room and was now lazing about on her bed. After weathering through that earlier discussion, it was time to change her mindset.

Well, thinking about it now... This may be a good opportunity.

The main goal of the Special Education Elementary Course was to educate Patricia. Mia was the only one with knowledge of this truth, and thus, she couldn’t leave the task to others. If she wanted to work toward this goal with certainty, it was best she take that role on herself.

This may make for an excellent practice run...

Mia turned her thoughts to her own children. Apparently, she’d be birthing eight of them, and she couldn’t just leave them be after the fact. She would need to provide them with a proper education. However...

I'm still not certain I can trust those who'll be looking after them to raise them properly.

Mia had complete confidence in Anne's ability to carry out that task. Just as she treated Mia, Anne would certainly take the proper carrot and stick approach in her child-rearing. Bel was proof of that. But for the *others*? Mia assumed that Ludwig was the most likely candidate to be her children's educator, but according to Bel...he could be a bit of a softy. As someone who had been brought to tears by the stupid four-eyes time and time again, Mia couldn't really accept this fact, but...

Considering the friendly grandpa face he puts on in front of Bel, I'm sure he'd treat all my children similarly. I'm not quite certain about Lynsha either...

Through her observations of Bel, Mia concluded that Lynsha went easy on her. Mia was thinking Lynsha would whip Bel into shape, so this had been quite unexpected.

Then there's Rina. I can easily imagine her proactively spoiling my children to get into Bel's parents' good graces.

While Mia had no plans on asking Citrina to play a part in raising her children, if she did...it was doubtful things would go well. It seemed there were no good candidates, which only meant Mia would have to take it upon herself to teach them the important things.

I'll need to bequeath them the art of deceiving old men, as well as any other convenient information I can give them. Like...how to kick well! I'll look back upon my experiences in Remno, and...

Anyway, this could be an opportunity to aid her in creating that bright future that lay ahead.

"Now that it's come down to it, I should be proactive in my role. Hmph..." Mia glanced to Anne and skillfully began her preparations. The first step was... "Anne, could I get you to buy something for me in town?"

"Yes, of course. What is it you need?"

Mia made her declaration loud and proud. "A pair of glasses without the lenses!"

Right now, Mia's deepest desire was...glasses, the embodiment of authority and intelligence!

For a moment, Anne simply looked puzzled. But then, she nodded. "Yes, I'll go look for them right away!"

With that, she left the room.

Chapter 39: Flow Low, Eat Bread

Now, just what should I do? What shall I teach Patty?

Having adorned a pair of glasses, Mia was ready to take this on. She thoroughly mulled over these questions over the previous night (in her sleep) and woke up early for a bath. There, she closed her eyes and pondered, occasionally dunking her head underneath the water as she ruminated.

"I-I can't think of anything!"

Once morning classes had ended and it was time for lunch, Mia felt like she was really in for some trouble. She would be teaching the SEEC children that very afternoon. In the morning, Julius would teach them foundational knowledge, and then Mia would take the reins and instruct them in ethics and morals.

However, Mia wasn't really one of upstanding morals, nor did she have proper ethics. It's not like she followed any philosophies either. Even if she worked her phony title of "Great Sage" for all it was worth, there was no way she could come up with anything good!

"J-Just what should I teach these children...? This might be the biggest predicament of my life..."

Still, Mia couldn't let herself look pathetic after telling Patricia she was a teacher of the Serpents. Mia recalled the vision of Patricia, telling her, "I look forward to your class, Miss Mia" without even so much as a smile. Mia couldn't disappoint her. She'd rather risk Patricia no longer going with whatever she said.

"Ugh... Let's see. The subjects I believe I'd be able to teach are heraldry, dance, horsemanship, and..." She counted away the subjects she thought she could instruct on using her fingers. "I-I have too few cards up my sleeves on this one."

But...was there any merit to teaching them in the first place? At least, that's what Mia couldn't help but think. All that was necessary was to make sure they didn't become Serpents. Given that this couldn't be instilled

through normal studies, there was great difficulty in determining what she should teach.

Still beset with these worries, the time came for her to teach her class with the SEEC program.

“C-Could I get Chloe to lend me a book and just read it to them as my lesson...?”

But that...sounded like a major pain. Mia didn’t want to read anything difficult. She no longer had the time for that anyway! Mia racked her brain harder than she had in a long time, worrying and worrying, ruminating and ruminating, until finally...

“That’s it! I’ll take them out to play!”

Mia flowed low. Yes, even without waves, water flowed on from high to low, and right now, it was sweeping Mia away lower and lower, straight into the easy route.

“Yes... It’s Julius’s job to put them through diligent studies. Thus, what *I* should teach is *not* diligent studies!”

All must be balanced. Should one only fill their mouth with bitter medicine, life would lose its color. If Julius was going to be the bitter medicine, then Mia...needed to be sweets. Suddenly, everything was clear to her.

“Yes, of course... How could I have been so mistaken? It was just yesterday that I was thinking I needed to be the sweets!”

Mia wasn’t here to be tough; she was here to be a sweet softy! That was Mia’s method of rule...and her method of teaching, the Way of Sweet (Moon) Jelly!

“In other words, if we wish to stop these children from becoming Serpents, we must teach them that this world is too good to destroy. Thus, I simply need to have them experience as much fun as possible! For now, I’ll put them on horseback... No, mushrooms may be the best place to start...”

Thus, Mia was in the best of moods when she headed for the dining hall. But it was there she witnessed an unfavorable event. The children of the Special Elementary Education Course sat stiff in the corner of the room, their faces held taught. Looking down on them were three boys in the most imposing stances they could muster.

“Hey! Why do you get to eat before us? You insolent orphans...” one of the boys grumbled.

Oho! I see this boy has a backbone. It's rare to find someone publicly going against the decisions of the student council. Do they not know that these children have the support of Miss Rafina?

Even the Mia of the previous timeline would never think to be so reckless. It seems that what would happen to the boys for acting this way in Saint-Noel Academy was outside of the scope of their imaginations. But perhaps that was only natural. To Mia, they looked like newly admitted students—young boys who had only come to the island this spring. Bloodthirsty and with ill regard to the common people, they were so the quintessential example of a "noble" it was almost amusing.

"Is it not because we ordered first?" Completely unperturbed, Patricia offered a response. She simply glanced up at them, her face as expressionless as always.

It only served to egg them on. "What? You would talk to *us* like that? Us *Tearmoon nobles*?"

Those words sent a shiver down Mia's spine. *T-Tearmoon nobles?! This is bad!*

It would be of little consequence to Mia if they were nobles of some random country, but as Tearmoon nobles, Mia would be the one ultimately answering for their misconduct. She was Tearmoon's princess after all, the one sitting right at the top.

Now that Sapphias, Esmeralda, and Ruby are no longer here, I see that the rest of the Tearmoon nobles are no longer reined in... How unexpected.

The three of them respected Mia's wishes and worked to relegate the Tearmoon nobles from behind the scenes. This was a result of their absence. Now, the only child of the Four Dukes that remained here was Citrina, and regardless of her abilities, the Yellowmoons were the weakest of the Four Dukes, and thus had weaker sway than the other three.

I'm quite concerned about what the future may hold... thought Mia as she hurried her way over to the table.

"S-Stop it, please. We just want to eat our lunch..." One of the girls stood up. Her long bangs partially concealed her face.

My, that's...Yanna. I'm certain she's the one who wants to fight back the most, but now that she's the leader, she's taken on the role of mediator.

Slightly surprised by this outcome, Mia rushed over. "Hello, everyone. What is this commotion about?" asked Mia with an elegant smile. Her

expression was faultless, her inner thoughts of “Look what trouble you’ve caused me, you damn brats!” pushed deep into her chest.

“Ah, Miss Mia!” called Patricia as she looked up. With her came the faces of all the other children who beforehand had frozen their eyes on the floor.

“Y-You’re Princess Mia...” The boys who had been glaring at Patricia jumped in shock, which was only to be expected. These boys were ranked below the Four Dukes, much less Mia. Thus, going against Mia’s word was completely out of the question.

Mia let out a victorious “Hmph!” and stared at the boys with crossed arms. It was then the boy who seemed to be the leader of the group addressed her.

“You arrived with perfect timing. I want to ask about your thoughts on the matter, Your Highness. Why have you gone out of the way for something so pointless? Should they have been the children of rich merchants, I would see the merit of allowing commoners into the academy. Money is power and proof of merit. They could also prove a use to us. But...” The boy twisted his grin and looked at the SEEC class. “These children are so poor that they can barely feed themselves! And aren’t there children of criminals among them?” He looked down at Yanna for a moment, his grin derisive. “Why have you allowed these children into our school? I’m certain they don’t even know how to eat with proper manners. Why should we have to share the building with such filth?”

His words had Mia internally breaking out into a cold sweat. *If you speak so loudly, Rafina could overhear you, and she’d absolutely* despise *what you just said...*

Such a loud utterance, when made in the dining hall, was bound to reach Rafina’s ears. And if it did, it was also bound to sour her mood. Even Sion would be scowling if he heard such a thing. In any case, it would be bad.

The boy’s words reflected Tearmoon noble mentality so perfectly, it gave Mia a headache. “You’re asking why, hm...”

Mia took a moment to consider her answer. It would be difficult to convince them of her reasoning. Improving Rafina’s mood by having the boys realize the error in their ways and offering the children an apology seemed to be off the table.

However, using her authority to quell the irritated boys would only lead

to future troubles. The Special Elementary Education Course had been forced into existence with authority and just reasoning. Justifying it again with more force would be risky...at least according to Mia's gut.

Rather, I doubt we'll be able to have a proper conversation unless they calm down a bit more. Just what should I do...?

Lost in her thoughts...Mia flowed low once again. "Low," in other words, the most primal of instincts: hunger. Right now, Mia's nose was prisoner to the aroma of freshly baked bread. She was sure it would taste lovely doused in honey.

Fighting like this in front of such tasty food is quite a waste...or rather, it isn't!

Mia had a moment of inspiration. Just what had angered them in the first place? What had made them so irritated? The answer was simple, as she had seen a hint of it just moments earlier. The boys had said it themselves: "Why do they get to eat before us?"

Oho! I see how it is. It's an empty stomach that's irritated these boys! Which means fixing that should be my first course of action...

Hunger instills frustration in all. Thus, Mia thought it'd be best to fill their stomachs and fix their moods before trying to talk her way out of this.

"Yes, I believe I understand. In which case, could you three please sit here?"

"Huh?"

Mia met the boy's confusion with a smile. "You three are upset that the children of the SEEC class get to eat before you. In which case, if you eat together at the same time, there should be no problems. Oh, yes. You were also worried that they would lack proper table manners. In which case, you can simply teach them." Mia made a seat between Yanna and Patricia. "Of course, I'll be eating here as well. I assume there are no complaints?"

Mia wasn't a strong enough person to simply watch others eat without her. All the thinking she did this morning had left her famished. She was ready to gulp down all the bread on the table.

The highest figure of Tearmoon had asked the three boys to eat with her. As Tearmoon nobles, there was no way they could refuse that request. While they clearly had some scruples, they each found a seat among the children of the SEEC program.

"For now, let's eat. We'll talk about why these children have been

welcomed here once our stomachs are filled."

With that, Mia began to think. *Rafina will probably come here herself once she hears of the commotion. Once she does, I'll make a display of the three Tearmoon nobles and the children of the SEEC program happily sharing a meal to have her excuse their misdeeds. After that, I can explain the reason for the SEEC program while just hiding the part about the Chaos Serpents. Oho! I've plotted this out perfectly.*

Mia chuckled to herself as she reached for the soft, fluffy bread before her eyes.

Chapter 40: Hostility for Hostility, Trust for...

Seeing the face of her little brother, Kiryl, sleeping peacefully in a fluffy bed, Yanna couldn't help but break into a wry grin.

"Ya let your guard down too easily, Kiryl," she muttered as she stroked his soft hair. Having been freshly cleaned, it was smooth and felt excellent to the touch. They had never taken baths in all their time in Ganudos. While they washed themselves with water, they were never privileged with the chance to use high quality shampoos like the ones that could be found here.

Yanna lightly touched her own hair, grinning at the faint aroma that wafted from it. She then tried to play it off by muttering, "Well, letting your guard down ain't good, but that's easier said than done if you're tired. The class we had this afternoon was plain weird..."

Lunchtime had been strange, featuring a party with the nobles who came to terrorize them. But the afternoon that followed was even stranger.

"A healthy spirit is cultivated in nature. They say that mushrooms reside in healthy hearts. Since Saint-Noel Island has a perfect spot for mushroom hunting, let's spend our afternoon gathering mushrooms."

By order of Princess Mia, Yanna and the others were brought to the woods. Yanna didn't get it at all. Morning classes had been easy for her to understand. Her instructor, Mr. Julius, had said that knowing letters meant being able to read the Holy Book. With that, one could learn how to live their lives. What is moral, and what is immoral? What is just, what is evil, and what is sin? Knowing that would make it harder to sully oneself in crime. For rulers, it bettered the people and made them easier to rule. Thus, Yanna understood the logic behind teaching them these things. While Yanna had never studied under anyone before, even she could easily understand this much.

Which was why her afternoon lessons stuck out as exceedingly strange. She had no idea what purpose dragging everyone out into the woods and

making them gather mushrooms could possibly have.

"Is she sayin' we need to provide for ourselves? But..."

That wasn't work; it was play. The youngest two of the group, Kiryl and one of the other girls, ran around laughing the whole time. It was worlds apart from the time they spent desperately trying to procure food just to survive. Kiryl was having more fun than Yanna had ever seen him have before.

"What's the deal with that girl...?" That doubt slipped naturally from her tongue. She had the same thought just a day earlier. Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon, the illustrious "Great Sage of the Empire," was someone Yanna just couldn't understand.

Yanna recalled the lunchtime commotion. She had been angered by the words that had been spat at her, but at the same time, she saw truth in them. She and the others of the SEEC program were useless, mere stains that threatened the public order. That fisherman must have thought the same, and so had the nobles of Ganudos Port Country.

Not to mention, Yanna was the child of pirates. She had been despised and treated like trouble for as long as she could remember. She had heard time and time again that if she would just die, at least she would stop causing trouble for others. And a part of her had come to believe that as well... But what kept her clinging to life for so long was the determination not to let the people who had shown her hatred get their way. That was her sole purpose.

But Princess Mia made me the class leader. She...believed in me...

That thought left Yanna...conflicted. *Just why did she trust me so easily? She doesn't know anything about me.* Yanna didn't believe in anyone except Kiryl, the only member of her family. Betrayal would be the end for her and her brother, making so much only natural. Thus, she didn't understand Mia, who had placed unconditional belief in her, at all.

Suddenly, there was a knock on her door. "Who could it...?"

For a moment, she was on full alert. But quickly, she laughed it off. This was Saint-Noel Academy. The students of the SEEC program—with the acceptance of Patricia, Mia's relative—lived in a facility beside the school's cathedral. In other words, they lived on school grounds, the safest place in the world. There was no need for caution.

With a sigh, she opened the door. There, she found one of the boys of

the Special Elementary Education Course. If she remembered right, his name was...

"Oh, uh... Karon, yeah?" He was the same age as Yanna and had come from an orphanage in the Holy Principality of Belluga. His most defining traits were his wild hair and sharp eyes. He looked like a troublemaker. "What do ya need?"

Yanna exited into the hall to avoid waking Kiryl. With that, Karon began to glance around the surroundings.

"Wanna go out for a bit?"

"Go out? Where?" Yanna seemed confused, but Karon feigned ignorance.

"Isn't that obvious? We're gonna go look for something valuable."

"Something valuable?"

"Come on! I heard you were a pirate's kid. I thought you'd be smarter than this, that you'd already have found some things you had your eyes on."

"What's that supposed to mean...?" Yanna's voice grew deeper.

"Nobles live on whims. They'll be all kind like this one day, and then just throw you away. We're like dogs or cats to them. So let's steal something valuable so it doesn't matter when they cut us off. You with me?" Karon sneered.

"Don't..." That left her mouth before she knew what she was saying.

"Huh?" Karon's eyes went wide. Yanna was equally as surprised.

What am I saying...? This guy's right...

At least, that's what the logical part of her brain was telling her, but still...her mouth moved on its own. "This place...it's different. It's not like where we've been. I think we can trust this Princess Mia, at least."

"Huh? What, you all happy you get to be leader? Are you stupid? That's no reason to trust her! I'm surprised you made it this long."

For some reason, Karon's words didn't hurt her. While they aligned perfectly with the values Yanna had held...now, they just pissed her off. "Well, whatever. But don't you dare do anything stupid!"

Karon glowered at her harsh words. "Not like I care, but rub that 'leader' nonsense off your face." Karon shoved Yanna's shoulders.

Suddenly, it all made sense to Yanna. Karon must have had a hard time in the orphanage. He learned to control his environment through violence and force. But Yanna hadn't relied on orphanages. She lived along with her

brother, going behind fishermen's backs to steal and living in the streets. In other words...she was much more experienced with real fights than he was.

Yanna grabbed Karon by the collar.

"Ow!"

"I'll say it one more damn time. Don't ya go off and be stupid. I won't look the other way if you do."

"Damn it, let go!" Karon seemed to be in pain, but Yanna held firm.

"Nope. Promise that you won't!"

"Is something the matter?" A calm voice suddenly reverberated through the air.

"Oh, Mr. Julius..."

The two were now faced with Julius, who was flashing them a calm smile. Yanna let go of Karon in a panic, and Julius's face grew a tad firmer.

"Yanna, no matter the reason, we must not resort to violence. Once you do, your argument loses credibility." His voice was firm, as if he was sharing the secrets of this world. But that quickly fell away. "...Is what I want to say, but that's not very logical, is it? There are times when violence is necessary. Karon might have done something that made you have to grab him like that." Julius turned toward Karon. "Could you tell me what happened? My lips aren't as tightly sealed as the priests who listen to confessions, but I'm quite good at keeping secrets."

A calming warmth could be found in his words...but Yanna just couldn't snitch. Seeing Yanna and Karon look at each other with their mouths shut, Julius sighed.

"Well, so be it. I am sure you both have your own reasons, but please do try and get along. You both have been given the opportunity to study at Saint-Noel under the same roof. I'm sure fighting with each other won't be much fun anyway." With those peaceful words, Julius left.

Chapter 41: Boys' Talk Ignites!

It was seven days after the students of the SEEC program arrived at Saint-Noel Academy that Abel's crew returned. In reality, they had planned on returning slightly earlier. However...

"Tee hee! That was so much fun, wasn't it, Bel?"

"Yes, it was! Tee hee! We should go walking around town again sometime!"

The two girls adorned one of Belluga's most famous souvenirs—the straw hats worn by pilgrims. They grinned at each other, and Lynsha stood with a calm expression slightly behind them...wearing a straw hat of her own!

Abel couldn't help the wry smile that crept up on his face at the sight of the girls. It had been a good journey. At least, that's what he had originally thought. But he hadn't expected Valentina's reaction. He had gone to visit her countless times, and during each visit, she only wore the same sarcastic grin. His words never seemed to reach her before...but the blank look on her face the moment she saw Bel assured him that she had been taken off guard. Her armor now cracked, he knew that Bel's words had found a way to worm themselves inside her heart.

I can't begin to imagine how my sister will change from here on out...

Of course, he was not expecting any immediate developments. He knew that this was a matter that required time, and thus resolved to be patient.

Nor do I know if the path this has set us down is a good one, but...

There was a chance his sister would take her own life, but that was something he perhaps had no control over.

My sister has done unforgivable things. While I doubt these are words Mia would say, we must reap the seeds we sow ourselves, no matter if they be good or bad...

Thus, Abel simply prayed. He wished that Valentina would refrain from doing anything rash, and that her reunion with Bel would change her for the better.

With that, he set his sights on Saint-Noel Academy. “I hope Mia is well...” he muttered.

It had been a while since they had met, and he was now desperate to see her face. And it seemed like his wishes were answered, for the moment he stepped foot inside the academy, he caught a glimpse of his beloved. Over the moon, he went to call out to her, but...

“Mia...” His voice tapered off into nothing, for Mia rushed by with the most serious of expressions, and she was headed straight for...a bespectacled man with a calm smile.

His breath caught in his throat. Mia gave a friendly bow to the unknown man before hurrying off with him in light steps. All Abel could do was watch.

“No, just what am I thinking...?”

He regained his composure. Should anxiety stop him in his tracks and force his mouth closed, he’d be no different from who he once was. He no longer surrendered himself to resignation. What use would it be if he could not take the necessary step forward in times like this?

Abel lifted his head and rushed onward. He headed straight for Mia—or rather, for *Sion*. He still lacked the courage to go after Mia himself!

“Ah, Abel. I see you’ve returned.” Sion was in his room in the boys’ dormitory, and he greeted his friend’s return with an eloquent grin. But that quickly faded into puzzlement. “Is something the matter? The color has drained from your face... Is it your sister?”

“No, she’s fine. Or well, it’s hard to consider her ‘fine,’ but she was the same as always,” he said with a sigh. “But the sight of Bel seemed to inspire something in her. I’m glad I brought her there.”

“I see. That’s all well, but...you do seem rather down. Did something happen?” Sion furrowed his brow with worry, but Abel simply shook his head.

“No, it’s nothing so serious. It’s just that as soon as I returned...I caught sight of Mia.” He shared what he had witnessed just moments earlier. It had Sion...breaking into a fit of laughter.

“Ha ha! There’s no need to worry. The man with glasses is Sir Julius of the Special Elementary Education Course.”

“He’s with the SEEC program?”

“Yes. Actually, there have been some issues with the program, so we in

the student council have been running around to put out the flames. The last few days have been busy ones."

"Oh... I see. So that's how it is..." Abel gave a sigh of relief.

"Listen, Abel. Don't leave Mia too alone, now." With a suddenly serious expression, Sion addressed what was really on Abel's mind.

"No, I wasn't..." Abel might have shaken his head, but Sion's attack was as sharp as his sword.

"Is it not because you fear you're too inattentive that you got so worked up in the first place?"

Abel groaned and gulped down his words, for Sion had hit the nail on its head. Busy with all that was happening with his sister, Abel couldn't spend as much time with Mia as he used to. Plus, Mia had been in low spirits from the loss of Bel until just a short while ago. He had resolved to stay by her side and support her, but...once Bel returned, that resolve had slightly...dissolved.

"Don't you feel somewhere deep down that you've been making her feel lonely? Like you've abandoned her?"

Abel had no response. "You may...be right about that."

While Abel was thinking, "Sion's just as sharp as always," it should go without saying that Sion had gone his entire life without a girlfriend. However, Sion didn't show it at all. He boldly advised his friend.

"Mia has been quite busy herself lately. Why don't you invite her on a date?"

"A date...? Now that I think about it, it's been quite a while since we've gone riding together..." Abel crossed his arms in thought as Sion nodded dramatically...

"That would be perfect. There, you should recite your ranked list of your 'top ten favorite things about Mia.'"

...And gave some truly questionable advice.

"*Ranked*, you said?" Ranking such a list was news to Abel, and he seemed a bit puzzled. Sion put on the proud face of an expert.

“The other day, I read something known as a ‘romance novel.’ It was my first experience with such a thing, but it was quite interesting. It’s where I discovered this method...”

Somehow, Sion seemed proud as he shared this knowledge. Incidentally, his first romance novel had passed from Mia to Tiona, then from Tiona to Sion, and it was written by none other than Mia’s official court author. Fueled by her imagination and delusions and setting them into full power, it was the most saccharine of saccharine love stories.

“Keithwood once informed me that performance was important when courting women,” Sion continued. “When I read the section in question, I couldn’t help but slap my knee and exclaim, ‘This was what he meant!’ Right, Keithwood?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. Right.” Keithwood absentmindedly nodded his affirmation.

In reality, the type of “performance” Keithwood was referring to was the likes of unplanned presents and not the preposterous level of ranking your ten favorite things about the woman, but...Keithwood was not of the right mind to correct him. He had his own problems to deal with, namely the fact that the day he would have to teach the Holy Lady how to make horse-shaped sandwiches would soon be upon him.

Thus, this was his response. “Performance is important, Prince Abel. Women are quite fond of it.”

There was nothing to save him from this half-assed answer!

“I see... This will help me greatly. Thank you, Sion.” Abel gave an earnest nod. While this would have never happened in the previous timeline, in this one Abel approached both swordsmanship and love with a simple honesty, and he gracefully carved his friend’s advice into his heart.

“Ha ha! It’s nothing. You and Mia having a falling out would spell trouble for me too.”

The two shared delightful grins as they set a ridiculous plan into motion.

Mia, on the other hand...

Chapter 42: Where Flowing Low Leads...

Mia was in the best of moods. She comfortably surrendered herself to the wave nipping at her back and pleasantly floated down its burbling stream. She was in such good humor that hums of satisfaction threatened to spill from her lips. No sooner had she realized that no waves were there to back her had she managed to find one through the feat of flowing low. Plus, she was beginning to feel that this wave was gradually gaining in both speed and strength.

The first signs of this had appeared to her on the first day of the SEEC program, just after their mushroom hunting. Having spent her afternoon doing the good work of gathering toadstools, she was incredibly pleased. She skipped her way to the dining hall, mushrooms in hand.

“Oho! What a great haul, and how fun this was! But...wait. Won’t Rafina get mad at me?” A sense of foreboding had begun its assault. That was when...

“Mia...”

“Eek!”

...Rafina appeared with the most apt of timing. She wore a cheerful smile as she hurried her way over to Mia. It sent a slight shiver down Mia’s back, but Rafina...immediately grasped Mia’s hand in hers.

“Ah! M-Miss Rafina! I haven’t gotten to wash my hands, so they’re quite dirty,” stated Mia, but Rafina paid her no mind. She looked straight at Mia.

“I heard what happened during lunch, Mia...” Emotional tears welled up in her eyes.

“You did?”

“You had the children of nobles sit at the table of orphans to share a lunch together. You even had the nobles teach them table manners... At least, those are the rumors.” Rafina grinned. There was no strain or

scheming behind it; this was the simple smile of a pleased young woman. “I knew you could do it, Mia! This is marvelous. The students of Saint-Noel are hesitant about the children of the Special Elementary Education Course. In ignorance, they condemn and ostracize them, but through mutual understanding, that can be resolved. Sharing lunch is an ideal method. Please make sure it continues.”

With that, Mia began to analyze her situation. *Well, it appears that she’s not here to tell me that taking the children mushroom hunting was over the top. I don’t hear any criticisms about Tearmoon nobles either. Oho ho! It’s just as I planned...*

Mia inwardly gave a satisfied smile. Then, she was blessed with a divine revelation. “Why, in that case, why don’t we make these lunchtime gatherings an established custom under your name?”

“Hm? What exactly do you mean?” Rafina gave Mia a blank stare.

Mia responded with a (self-)satisfied smile. “I mean that we should make it a custom for the students of the academy to share their lunch with the children of the Special Elementary Education Course. Should those of the SEEC program stay as they are—stiffly and uncomfortably sitting around while they eat—they’ll never become an accepted part of the academy, and if we use your name, we will be able to coerce the other students to share lunch with them. Oh! And we could have the members of the student council join in. Why don’t we have them invite other students to the table with the SEEC program?”

This strategy would utilize the sway of Rafina and Sion’s name value to draw other students in. Plus, other members of the student council like Tiona and Rania had deep relations with the farmers in their lands. It was doubtful they would resist getting to know the children of the SEEC program as well. And to make things even better, Chloe could use her abundant knowledge of books to create conversation when things fell silent.

“It shall be ‘Lunch Hour of the Holy Lady.’”

“I think that’s a wonderful plan. However, there is one thing that worries me. Taking ownership of your achievements for myself is not something I’d really like to... And if the whole of the student council is to take part in this plan, would it not be better to name the practice after you?”

Mia shook her head at the scowl now on Rafina’s countenance. To Mia, this was the obvious solution. Mia’s thought process was predicated on not

monopolizing glory—in other words, dividing risk. No matter how great it would be for the noble students to share their lunch with the children of the SEEC program, the plan presented a certain degree of risk. Should a problem occur, it would be the person who had the idea (in this case, Mia) who would have to take responsibility.

In which case, it was best to force—apologies, *share*—that responsibility. Thus, it was best to implicate Rafina through use of her name. Mia was dead set on bringing Rafina down with her should this ship sink.

"No, I insist. It should be under your name."

Rafina nodded meekly. "I see... So you wish to spread the practice throughout the continent. You're saying that the merits of such a lunch exchange should be touted not by the student council president of Saint-Noel Academy nor the princess of the Tearmoon Empire, but by the Holy Lady of Belluga. That's what you mean, right?" she asked, seeking mere confirmation.

Huh? For a moment, Mia had no idea what Rafina was thinking. But, if Rafina was agreeing to her plan, she thought it would be best to just nod along.

A call to action made by the student council president would be limited to the academy, and a call made by the princess of Tearmoon would be limited to Tearmoon. But...what would happen when a call to action was made by the Holy Lady Rafina? Just how much power would it have? Mia hadn't thought that far ahead.

Rafina let out a small sigh, clearly deeply moved. "You really are marvelous, Mia... And I call myself the 'Holy Lady.' How presumptuous."

"Hm? I don't think so at all. You're always doing your best, and that's something I know well."

Currently, Mia was in her best form...that of a jellyfish. The wave pushing her along now was strong, and it ushered her jelly self firmly downstream. Mia had rushed to offer encouraging words to her clearly sullen friend. However, she picked her words with excellent precision.

It would be bad to simply declare that Rafina was a "good person," for if that were not the truth, it would be obvious flattery, and if it *were* the truth, Rafina was not of the mind to simply accept that fact. She'd simply think, "Mia thinks I'm a good person, so I need to become even better!" And with

words like that, she'd simply push herself into a corner and into the worst of circumstances.

Thus, Mia had said she was "always doing her best." These words presented no issues. For one, Rafina really was doing her best. For another, very few people would say they themselves *weren't* doing their best. Even when it came to Bel, if you asked her if she was doing her best, she wouldn't deny it. Yes, even *Bel* would say she was doing all she could. Thus, it was doubtful Rafina would count herself among the few who would deny such a statement.

Rafina's sadness had come from the results of her efforts not having the intended effect. When dealing with such people, it was best to first acknowledge their efforts, and then account for contingency with words like, "That's something I know well."

Maybe Rafina *wasn't* doing her best, but it looked like she was to Mia. In fact, Mia was the only one who could see this...or at least, that's what Mia would tell her.

Thus, she limited her assessment to the level of personal feelings. With this, she sought to crush the possibility that her words would be taken as lies or empty flattery. This was a personal matter, and thus, the only one who could deny that this was how Mia saw things was Mia herself.

These calculated words, for a moment, inspired silence from Rafina.

"Thank you..." she finally managed. She then turned around. "I'll do as you suggested immediately. I'll endorse Lunch Hour of the Holy Lady, sharing a meal with the children of the SEEC program, to the student body."

With that, she left.

Somehow or another, the SEEC program began with wonderful success. Even at the onset, the children of nobles who disdained these children had begun to soften their views. There were many who took up Rafina's call to action, even fighting to get a chance to share a meal with the students of the Special Elementary Education Course. But watching the Tearmoon nobles stare at Rafina with glittering eyes, there was something Mia wasn't quite satisfied with...

This isn't how they treated me *at all! Hmph, perhaps it's just my imagination...*

She decided not to think too much about it.

“You’ve done well, Miss Mia.”

“My, whatever do you mean, Patty?”

“I’m referring to lunch. Nobles and commoners, much less orphans, do not share meals... You have broken that rule, breeding chaos.”

Patty was up to her usual disturbing conversation topics. Mia decided to put that aside for now, for she was in the best of moods. Class went well. Julius carried out his lessons aptly, and besides the apparent sleepiness of a few of the children—as well as Mia who had come to observe the class—all seemed to be taking their lessons seriously. For the children, this had become a place of learning.

Yup, things were as good as good can be. Mia’s wave had been a raging stream. It’s just that unfortunately, Mia had yet to realize that this was not a fun water ride, but a fight down the raging rapids...raging rapids that ended in a huge waterfall.

“Mia, could I have a moment?” As Mia walked down the hallway, she was suddenly approached by Rafina. The moment she whispered into Mia’s joyful yet curious ears, Mia’s mouth fell open in shock.

“Huh? A-A silver sacrament was stolen?!”

Thus, the waterfall came into view.

Chapter 43: The Meaning of the Third Eye

Having eagerly made her way to the student council room, Mia was greeted by Julius and Rafina.

“I see you’re present too, Julius.”

“Yes. I am the teacher of the SEEC program after all,” he said, adjusting his glasses. The lenses glinted as he did so, which Mia found reassuring.

Mia looked over to Rafina. “Just what in the moons is happening?”

“It’s just as I said earlier. We’ve learned that a silver sacramental item has been stolen from the storehouse.”

Julius scowled. “Hm? Then, is it not yet certain whether one of my children is the culprit?” Julius asked, clearly perplexed. “Since you had called for me, I was sure one of them was guilty...”

Rafina’s expression remained stern. “We’re not certain that it was a student of the Special Elementary Education Course. However...”

Mia knew exactly what Rafina wanted to say. After all, she was probably the world’s greatest victim of defamation, spread through rumors both fact and fiction. And in Mia’s case, it was probably more fact than fiction.

But anyway, whether a student of the SEEC program was the culprit or not was not the real issue they faced. That which hadn’t happened before had occurred after these students had been accepted into the academy. It was very possible that fact alone would be fodder for libel.

“This is the perfect scandal for those who aren’t a fan of the SEEC program...” A thought suddenly occurred to Mia. “What exactly is this stolen silver sacrament?”

Rafina put a hand to her face and smiled. “Don’t worry. It’s nothing that can’t be replaced, nor is it all that special, but that’s exactly what throws so much suspicion on the SEEC class. Should it have been something irreplaceable, it’s possible that a child of noble descent could have their

eyes on it...but there's no reason for them to covet something so plain."

Aha. So, the culprit has to be someone who'd be swayed by the item's material value... This really makes the SEEC children look fishy!

With such trouble before her, Mia couldn't help but sigh.

"I don't believe it... Those children cannot have been the culprits. They all have hearts of gold." Julius's voice grew rough with indignation. "Is there no one else who could have done it? It's not just those in need of coin who go after silverware, is it?"

"What other motive could there be...?"

"To state an example, someone not fond of the Special Elementary Education Course could be trying to frame the program...or perhaps looking to hinder the ceremonies the sacrament is used in itself."

That one makes sense. A Serpent could be trying to interrupt sacred rites... Wait! What if Patty's involved in all this?

Mia suddenly felt dizzy. If that was the case, the item would be stolen to interrupt one of Rafina's ceremonies, which meant an obvious attack on Rafina *herself*. And it was none but Mia who had brought her here. *Mia* was to blame!

M-Moons, this is bad!

Cold sweat flooded down Mia's back as she forced a smile. "Someone who wishes to harm the ceremonies, you say?"

Rafina, on the other hand, pulled her face taut and pondered. "In any case, we must think of a countermeasure to keep the uproar this will cause to a minimum. I'll ask Prince Sion to help...and Julius, my apologies, but please keep a close eye on the children."

"Understood." After a deep bow, he lifted his head to reveal a slight smile. "With all due respect...I am quite relieved. I was certain you would announce the end of the SEEC program, which would have been terribly tragic for the children."

"We have yet to know if one of the children really is the culprit. I would never do anything of the sort. So please, relax." After Rafina flashed him a kind smile and some kind words, Julius once again bowed and left the room.

"Someone who wished to interfere with the ceremonies here, is it...?" After muttering that once more, Rafina turned to Mia. "There is something I

must tell you."

Her strong gaze had Mia's heart skipping a beat. "Oh, um...? Wh-What is it?"

Mia's mind was going a million miles, thinking, *What if she's about to question Patty?* and *Moons, I don't want to hear this!* but what came out of Rafina's mouth was completely unexpected.

"It's about Barbara. She's still here on this island."

"Huh?" For a moment, Mia had no idea what she was talking about. But finally, the memories of being attacked by the escaped Barbara returned to her. "My, I thought she had been returned to the facility she had been kept at before..."

"Honestly, we have yet to decide what to do with her. She is a Serpent deeply entrenched in their ideology, but her past is one deserving of sympathy. Thus, I am hesitant to lock her away somewhere so harsh..."

"I...see? Then...do you believe she's the thief?"

It was true that Barbara would have an interest in hindering any sacred rites, however...

"I don't think so, given our current investigations. However, given the apt timing of this mayhem, it does appear to perhaps point to the Chaos Serpents."

The Special Elementary Education Course was meant as a countermeasure for the creation of new Serpents. Obvious ill will toward the class aligned with the Serpents' goals.

"They truly are a troublesome bunch..." sighed Mia.

Rafina drew her voice to a whisper. "Mia, do you know the meaning of the Third Eye?"

The question was sudden. "The Third Eye...? That's the tattoo on Yanna and Kiryl's foreheads, no? All I've heard is that it's a mark passed down by their people."

Mia was confused, but Rafina's next words had her scowling. "It's 'the Eye that Sees Truth.' It's a concept shared with ancient evil cultists." Rafina pointed to her forehead. "They believe that the people that the Holy Deity created and deemed complete are lacking. To make them complete, they believe they need a third eye that can see the truth. It's a form of sacrilege."

"Then, do the tattoos on Yanna and Kiryl mean the same?"

"I'm not certain. They may no longer have that meaning, but at the very

least, they once did. Those two also came here from Ganudos Port Country." With that, Rafina placed a bundle of parchment on the desk.

"And this is...?"

"It's the current results of our ongoing investigation on the underground shrine you discovered."

"The underground shrine? Oh, right..."

Mia recalled her summer with Esmeralda. She had forgotten about the shrine, as well as the epitaph describing the sins of Tearmoon's first emperor and his connection with the Chaos Serpents. Their images now clear in her mind, she couldn't help but scowl. And just where had that deserted island been? Who were the Chaos Serpents that the first emperor encountered?

"...Moons."

Rafina nodded. "The report mentioned the minority seafaring culture of the Visalians. They are one of the candidates we believe might have been the origins of the Chaos Serpents."

"Miss Rafina, you don't mean to suggest that just because the two's ancestors are connected to the Serpents, they are the thieves, do you...?"

Mia shivered. And *not* just because she was the descendant of Tearmoon's first emperor. Certainly not. The fact that a more recent family member—her very own Grandmother Patricia—was a Chaos Serpent pupil had become a higher priority. Should Kiryl and Yanna's distant ancestors perhaps being the origins of the Serpents make them culpable, Mia wouldn't be able to avoid judgment either.

Rafina was shocked by Mia's statement. "No, that's not what I was saying at all, Mia." She fervently shook her head. "I was just thinking that those children, too, are victims of the Serpents. In which case...we must protect them. No matter the cost."

Seeing Rafina with her stern expression set on protecting the children of the SEEC program, Mia couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief.

Chapter 44: Patty's Friends, Patty's Past

"Origins, huh...?" Mia couldn't get Rafina's words out of her mind. As she crossed her arms and began to think, her feet naturally carried her somewhere. Indeed, *somewhere*... In other words, the dining hall!

After all the complicated discussions, Mia was famished. She hurried to the dining hall, thinking to herself that intricate talks were not to be had right before supper, when she suddenly ran into some familiar faces just as she reached the entrance.

"My? It's Patty...as well as Yanna and Kiryl."

"Ah...Miss Mia." Having noticed Mia's presence, Patty offered a greeting. The pair of siblings stared at her as well.

Mia found this to be quite the odd group, but she headed over to them anyway. Her eyes naturally found their way to Kiryl and Yanna. Their bangs had been cut a tad shorter, perhaps at Mia's earlier suggestion. Now, their faces were clearly visible.

Yanna, the older sister, had sharp and determined eyes, as well as a beautiful nose. These were the traits that defined her, and it was clear she'd grow up to be alluring. On the other hand, Kiryl's face appeared meek. His round eyes stared up at Mia, wobbling as if nervous. And of course, they both had an eye tattooed on their foreheads.

The origin of the Chaos Serpents, the Visalians...

"Um...?" muttered Yanna, suspicious of Mia's intense stare.

Mia smiled it away. "Are you three here for a meal?"

"Yes. We promised to eat together tonight," Patty stated with a nod.

Kiryl happily nodded away as well, grinning from ear to ear. "Patty's gonna eat my moonbeans for me!"

After those words left his mouth...Patty gave him a head pat! And she looked quite used to the action to boot. It left a question mark floating in Mia's head.

"I keep telling you that ya can't be choosy... Patty spoils you too much..." grumbled Yanna.

Mia tilted her head. “My... ‘Patty,’ you said?”

“Oh! Um, no. She’s Miss...? Patricia. Miss Patricia.”

“Oho! No need for formalities. Right, Patty?”

Patty nodded silently and looked into Yanna’s eyes. “Yes, it’s fine. Call me as you did before...because we’re friends.” Her words were a mere whisper, but the firm affirmation they carried put a smile on Mia’s lips.

Oho! She’s made some friends. This is a good sign.

What had saved Citrina from House Yellowmoon’s ties to the Serpents was the existence of a friend—Bel. Mia was certain that Patty’s ties of friendship would help save her as well.

After thoroughly enjoying their meal, Patty and Mia bid farewell to Yanna and Kiryl and headed for their room. As soon as they arrived, Mia flashed her a huge grin.

“I’m relieved to see you’ve made friends, Patty. How wonderful.”

Patty nodded. “Yes... Oh, no... They’re not friends.”

“Hm?” Mia found Patty’s response strange.

“Serpents have no need for friends. They are a nuisance. Thus, those two are not my friends.”

“I see...”

Something really is off about her. Does she truly *wish to become a Serpent?*

The cogs in Mia’s mind were currently moving relatively smoothly. Of course, that was thanks to the delicious dessert she had just indulged in. It was yummy beyond compare—especially the sweetmoon cherry that sat atop the whipped cream. Anyhow...

“Patty, do you—”

“Um, actually, Miss Mia,” Patty pivoted. “I heard that something important was stolen.”

“So the news reached your ears as well.”

“Yes. I heard that a big silver plate disappeared.”

“It appears so. Hm...” For a moment, Mia scowled. It inspired worry in Patty.

“The Special Elementary Education Class...isn’t going to be dissolved, is it?”

“Of course not! It’ll be fine. It’s just that... Oho!” Mia suddenly giggled.

“These friends of yours are quite important to you, I see...”

For some reason, those words caused Patty to shiver. “That’s not...true.” She shook her head as if in a panic. Her words sounded like mere excuses. “The Special Elementary Education Course will be a help to the Chaos Serpents. It will help us destroy order and breed chaos.”

“Oh... Yes, you’re right. That may indeed be the case.” Mia nodded at Patty’s desperate attempt to defend the SEEC program. “In that case, we’ll just have to do our best to make sure the program is able to stick around.”

That night, Mia awoke to the sound of an unsettling voice. “Ugh... Ugh...” it moaned. It was a cry of pain, incredibly excruciating, tragic...and scary! It sounded like a ghost!

In response, Mia...decided to pretend that she couldn’t hear a thing. One couldn’t show any reaction to the supernatural. What scary voice? Mia couldn’t hear anything like that. Not at all. Definitely not.

At least, those were the words she repeated in her head.

“Milady... Milady...”

Her body now shaken, Mia was forced to sit up. When she did, she was faced with a worried Anne.

“What is it, Anne?”

“It’s Miss Patty.”

“Patty?” Mia stood up and made her way to Patty’s bed. “She must be having a night terror,” whispered Mia as she peered into Patty’s face.

“Mm-hmm...ugh...Hannes...” She furrowed her brow and squeezed the blanket close. The name that had left her mouth inspired a tiny feeling of doubt in Mia.

“Hannes? Who could that be?” The name was completely unfamiliar to Mia. At the very least, it couldn’t have been another student in the SEEC program. “Just what is she dreaming about?”

Given Patty’s age, the most likely characters to appear in her dreams would be her parents. But normally, one wouldn’t call their parents by their names. Though there was the possibility it was the name of a friend or a servant, Mia didn’t quite buy that explanation either.

That’s right. I just saw how Patty treats Kiryl... Could she have a younger brother of her own?

The fact that Yanna, Kiryl, and Patty got along so well supported that theory.

Yanna and Patty have quite opposite personalities, but if they’re both older sisters, that might have drawn them together.

It was no wonder the wheels in Mia’s mind were turning well. She had some delicious cookies just before bed, and she made sure to properly rinse her mouth out afterward. Well, not that it matters...

The younger brother of my grandmother’s would be one of my relatives as well. He might have even been head of their family, so it would be odd for me to not have heard of him...

Mia had long since forgotten that she was once so afraid of the “Cursed House Clausius” that she used to do everything in her power to shut out all information about them.

The next morning, “Famous Detective Mia” and her assistant Anne were on the case. Last night, a relationship between Patty and the two Visalians had been confirmed. Should the two of them be judged at trial, Patty’s future as a Chaos Serpent was all but determined.

Anne was also quite fired up. Not only did she have great sympathy for these children, Mia’s realized vision of the SEEC program was in danger. Thus, she mustered every ounce of her strength as she accompanied Mia, determined not to ruin her reputation as Mia’s maid.

“Where are we headed, milady?”

“Excellent question... Hm, just where should we go?” groaned Mia as she crossed her arms.

I’d like to just come up with some excuses to resolve this situation, but doing so for a crime at Saint-Noel’s can’t be good... Ugh, I’ve got to at least

do something.

"Princess Mia!"

A voice suddenly called out to her. Turning around, she was faced with one of the Tearmoon boys from the lunchtime fiasco...the one who was their leader.

"My, you're...Clemens, the son of Viscount Cescutti, yes?" Mia grinned. It was her style to make sure that the students who seemed like they might cause future trouble knew that Mia was aware of exactly who they were. Rather, it was supposed to be a way of intimidating them, but...

"Her Highness Princess Mia...knows my name..." It had the opposite effect. Clemens was so moved that tears welled in his eyes. However, he quickly shook them away. "Anyway, Your Highness, I heard a rumor that some important religious item was stolen..."

I see word gets around fast...

Mia inwardly cursed. Had only a few known about the incident, they could have kept it from creating too much of a fuss. Just who had been blabbering it to all who would listen?

Perhaps bad rumors about the SEEC program are just easily spread...

Trying to hold back her impending headache, Mia returned her gaze to Clemens. She was certain he'd come to share the same vitriol as earlier, but his words surprised her.

"Were they...truly the ones who did it?" The possibility seemed to pain him.

"We can't say anything as of yet. It's true that they appear the most suspicious, but if they had stolen it, just where would they have hidden it? It also seems doubtful that they would have been able to sell it on the island. In fact, I doubt one could sell such a thing in all of Belluga."

Even had the culprit been after coin, a sacrament wasn't something that could be easily sold. Thus, it was hard to say that the SEEC children seemed particularly suspicious.

Hearing Mia's words, a look of relief passed across Clemens's face. However, he quickly shook it away. "W-Well, we can't trust the actions of lowly commoners..."

His conflicting words put a smile on Mia's lips. Then, he bowed and left, all the while looking rather embarrassed.

"For the students who haven't directly interacted with the SEEC

program and instead only view them as ‘commoner children,’ this poses quite a big issue. We have to do something.”

Unfortunately, that worry proved true.

On the following day, the grievances of the student council continued, and Sion along with the other members spent the day trying to counter the commotion. Meanwhile, Mia was on the hunt for a solution. She chased down the man that was her only lead.

“Julius, do you have a moment?”

“Ah, Your Highness. What is it?”

Mia met Julius’s hesitance with a sincere look. “I have something to discuss with you. Is that all right?”

“Yes. In that case, let’s head inside.” Julius glanced behind Mia. Most likely, he was trying to avoid being in a room with Mia alone. He was quite the considerate man.

With that, Julius led Anne and Mia into his private quarters. The room had been prepared especially for the instructor of the SEEC program, and his desk was littered with thick books.

“My, are these the books you’re planning on using in class? I see you’re quite enthusiastic about lesson preparations.”

“Yes, teaching isn’t something to cut corners on. Not to mention, all the children are just wonderful.” Julius gestured for her to sit down. After she did, he once again began to speak. “Have you come to discuss the theft?”

“Yes, I have. How have the children been?”

Julius gave a worried nod. “They are all rather flustered. I do assure them there is nothing to worry about, but... What are your truthful thoughts on the matter, Princess? I do not believe one of them to be the culprit.”

“Yes, I of course share your belief. However, that opinion isn’t shared by everyone, so we must do something to convince them. I was wanting to hear your opinion on that matter.”

“So the rumors are true. You’re quite the maverick, Your Highness.”

“The rumors? My, what rumors?”

“My apologies, I did not mean it in a bad way. However...most of high blood regard commoners as lowly. I was convinced you would treat my children as criminals.”

“Looking down on commoners like that really is quite foolish.”

That was exactly the path that led Mia to the guillotine. The people were not lowly, nor were they weak, and they were certainly not to be continuously stepped on. Mia knew that painfully well—specifically around the neck area.

"In that case, I am sure you can see my viewpoint, Your Highness. Those children would never resort to thievery. In which case, are there no other suspects? The Holy Lady appeared to think there may be..."

"Well, I suppose there are..."

Of course, the person heading that list was Barbara, who was currently on the island. Could such an incident occurring during her presence really be just a coincidence?

"To put it simply, all we must do is find the perpetrator. We only need to discover a criminal who is someone other than the children of the SEEC program. Thus, depending on the circumstances, we may need to have someone take the blame."

His glasses glinted as he spoke, but this time, it had Mia taking a big nervous gulp. "Are you suggesting...we sacrifice someone?"

Julius nodded solemnly. "From what I can determine, the person on the Holy Lady's mind has committed evil worthy of suspicion. In which case...why don't we add this crime to his or her list of sins and have them take responsibility?"

Blaming the crime on the Serpents had been a thought that crossed Mia's mind as well. But this was...

"We must protect these children," he insisted. "I just wish for you to consider this means of doing so."

Once Julius claimed this was all for the children, it became harder for Mia to oppose his proposal. If that was the only method available to them, perhaps that was what it would have to come to. But after learning of Barbara's past, Mia was hesitant to be too harsh. Rafina, too, most likely thought the same.

"Why don't we begin by examining where your culprit is currently locked away and if they would be able to steal the item? If you could just tell me where they're being kept, I could—"

"Oh, no. It won't need to come to that. Let's leave this to Miss Rafina."

Obviously, they couldn't let Barbara meet anyone else. *Perhaps I'm not in a position to choose my options here...*

Mia’s troubles only grew deeper.

Having left Julius’s quarters, Mia headed to the cathedral, pondering all the way there.

“It would be so nice if the culprit could just fall right into our laps...” she muttered as she stepped inside. Saint-Noel’s cathedral was a facility normally open to students. Some would come to pray in the grand space, others would come to simply clear their minds, and others would come to reflect on their past actions. The Central Orthodox Church recommended their halls be used for all these things.

However, there were no regular students here today. Instead, there was...

“Ah, Mia!”

...Rafina, draped in pure white ceremonial garb, and her attendants. They appeared to be in the middle of a ceremony.

“My, Rafina! Just what is all this?”

“We are doing the rites to replace the stolen sacrament.” She took the item in question out of a wooden box. It was a large plate that shined white.

“This is what was stolen, then. Is it used to serve bread?”

“Yes. It has a few other uses as well, but in reality, it’s only used for Holy Communion, and it’s actually just a plain silver plate, though we do refer to it as a ‘sacrament.’” Rafina shrugged. “I wish we could just say, ‘Look at how replaceable this is! There’s no need to make such a fuss over it.’” She sighed with a scowl.

Mia grinned back at her. “Yes, you’re right...but this is quite the big plate. Huge, in fact... Wait.”

Suddenly, Mia realized something was off. At first, Rafina had undoubtedly said that a “silver sacrament” had been stolen. But just by looking at it, Mia wouldn’t have thought there was anything sacred about it. She just thought it looked like a “big silver plate,” and hadn’t Mia heard it be described as exactly that not too long ago?

Yes, this is a big plate. However, I didn’t say that, and I doubt Miss Rafina did either. Then...why did Patty call it that?

Why did Patty know that it was a plate that had been stolen? It could only mean...

Mia’s face went white. *N-No way. Is Patty...the culprit? No, she can’t be...*

Suddenly, someone entered the cathedral.
“Sorry to interrupt. Oh, Mia. There you are.”
“My, Abel. You’re back!”
Mia’s expression made a three-sixty, becoming an ebullient grin.

Chapter 45: Mia Heads for Battle! (Or Really, a Horseback Date)

While Mia was now face-to-face with Abel, she quickly grew anxious. It had been a while since they had last met, but for some reason, his expression was serious. So serious it inspired fear in Mia.

"Wh-What is it, Abel? You look a tad frightening..."

"Oh, um... It's nothing important." Abel slapped his cheeks and put on a grin. "Actually, I was thinking I'd invite you on a date on horseback."

"Huh?" His proposition was so sudden, Mia was at a bit of a loss.

"Of course, only if you have the time, that is."

"Oh, yes, I have the time. Or rather, I can *make* the time."

Mia glanced at Rafina. While Rafina's grin was a bit awkward, she was also squeezing her hands into fists and mouthing, "Good luck!"

Mia nodded in response. "In that case, I'll go get ready. Why don't we meet at the stables in a half hour...no, an hour? Would that be all right?"

"Got it. I'll be waiting for you."

Having bid farewell to Abel, Mia clacked her heels down the hallway. She broke into a jog, then a sprint. As she ran, she pulled her dress to her nose and gave it a good sniff.

I don't think I smell sweaty...but just in case!

Mia approached Anne with dignity and elegance. "Anne, hurry up and prepare some bathwater! Oh, and my riding clothes too!" She ordered her personal maid like a general heading off to battle.

"Right away, milady!"

Anne responded with a vigorous "hup-too!" She was this general's trusted tactician, and she met her lord's request flawlessly. She dunked Mia in the bath, scrubbing her clean and dressing her in her horse-riding clothes. Her skills were those of a seasoned veteran. Speedy and efficient, delicate and thorough, Mia could do nothing but gaze in wonder at Anne's work.

Anne's no longer the clumsy maid who flung that cake into the air...

However, Anne interrupted Mia's thoughts of admiration. "I'm finished, milady."

"Thank you, Anne. You've been a great help."

Letting her silky smooth and freshly washed hair dance in the wind, Mia dashed off.

"Well, then. To the stables!"

The curtains were about to open on this battle (read: date).

I feel like it's been quite a while since I've visited these stables.

Mia had been so busy lately she had little time to ride horses. She was visiting them now after a long period of no contact.

Hopefully none of them sneeze on me as revenge.

Mia was on high alert. But suddenly, she realized something was different. "My, Kuolan isn't here. Just who...?"

After Malong had graduated, students willing to ride the wild Kuolan had dramatically decreased. For one thing, the horse was terribly moody. Mia considered herself one of the best riders on the continent (yes, she declared that proudly!), but riding him was still no mean feat. Simply steering him was a herculean task, making him no horse for any fun joyrides.

Thus, Mia was worried he had gotten lonely, but it quickly appeared that wasn't the case.

"Princess Mia. Are you here to ride?"

The voice prompted Mia to turn around, bringing her face-to-face with a girl straddling none other than Kuolan.

"My, Aima, so you're at Saint-Noel's. Were you out on a ride?" The girl was Ka Aima, younger sister of the Fire Clan's chief—a clan which had just reunited with the rest of the Equestrian Kingdom.

Aima petted Kuolan as she spoke. "It is a rare chance, so I asked the Holy Lady to let me ride him. He is a fine horse. His legs are sturdy and his muscles defined. There is no room for complaints, just as I would expect from a horse so beloved by you, Princess Mia. He rivals my own dear steed, Keilai. Ha ha! Riding him was tough work, but highly rewarding."

Hearing such praise, Kuolan let out a proud whinny. His nostrils twitched, and Mia prepared for the worst. However, the horse simply looked at her as if saying, "What's up with you?"

“Hm? Is something troubling you?”

Kuolan dismissed Aima’s confusion with a look that said, “I don’t know what’s up with her either.” His expression made him look obedient. *Obedient!*

Agh! This isn’t the attitude he takes with me at all!

Mia was quite dissatisfied about the whole thing, but she took some deep breaths to calm herself down. Then, she returned her gaze to Aima. “Anyway, what brings you here, Aima?”

“Oh, yes. I received word from my brother recently. I have come to report his news and deliver a letter for the Forest Clan’s Malong to the Holy Lady Rafina.”

“A letter from Malong to Miss Rafina, you say? I wonder what it could be about...”

“I am clueless as well. However, it does not appear to be an emergency. Perhaps it is best we leave the matter be...” muttered Aima. Then, her eyes darted around their surroundings as if she had just remembered something. “Incidentally, is *that man* not with you?”

“That man...? Do you mean Dion? No, he’s currently working in Tearmoon.”

“I see... No, but he does strike as unexpectedly as the wolfmaster. I must stay vigilant.” For a moment, Aima looked relieved, but she quickly shook her head. “I shall leave before I encounter anything too frightening. I am sure the Holy Lady Rafina is waiting for me. Enjoy your ride, Princess Mia.” With that, she left.

“I see she’s still afraid of Dion. Well, I understand how she feels very well, but once you get used to him he’s not so...no, he’s still scary.”

“Sorry, were you waiting for long?” Abel appeared with perfect timing, and Mia looked at him with a smile.

“Nope, I just got here myself.”

“That’s a relief, but... Oh, but anyway.” Abel cleared his throat. “Those clothes look wonderful on you. I see you had some new riding gear made.”

“Oho! Thank you for the compliment, Abel.”

Mia had grown a bit larger (and not widthwise—in other words, because of F.A.T.—but heightwise. Yes, Mia had grown taller. She had *grown*, and it wasn’t F.A.T.!) Thus, she had gotten some new riding clothes made just a few days prior.

Incidentally, this design had been decided on after Anne had done everything in her power to stop Mia after she had muttered, “Maybe I should take the opportunity to get something a bit flashy...” Anne had no doubts that Mia’s horsemanship skills were of superior quality...but at the same time, she knew that Mia falling from her horse was a frequent occurrence. Thus, having Mia wear clothes like the ones she adorned in the Equestrian Kingdom was the most ideal of ideals. Therefore, she made sure that the clothes were both as effective as possible while also limiting any damage falling from her horse could do to her. That said, she had something else in mind as well.

“Milady needs the perfect attire for every occasion. No matter how beautiful the swimsuit, it would only turn its wearer into a laughingstock if worn on horseback. No matter how great the riding gear, it would put off anyone at a party. No matter how beautiful the clothes, if its decoration hinders one’s riding abilities, then...” In her head, Anne became Ludwig and made her case.

Hearing those words, Mia felt as if she could see some phantom glasses on Anne’s nose. “I see... Yes, you’re right. These are the clothes I’d be wearing if I ever had to make my escape. In which case, they absolutely must be functional...”

Swayed by the authority of a phantom, Mia followed Anne’s advice.

It seems Abel’s fond of them as well. Oho! It’s all thanks to Anne, my tactician in love!

Singing the praises of her loyal maid deep inside her heart, Mia returned her eyes to Abel. “Well then, shall we be off? Are you okay with the shore of Noelige Lake as our destination?”

“Hm... What do you say about heading to the forest today?”

Mia giggled. “That’s a fine idea. Everything is green and starting to sprout. It’ll be refreshing,” sang Mia in the highest of spirits.

Chapter 46: Princess Mia Is So Pained...She Grits It Out with a Grin!

"Oho! This wind is so refreshing and pleasant." Mia looked to the azure sky with a calm smile. The light of the sun reflected off the white clouds with a soft glow, raining warmth down to the earth. Given the current heat of early summer, the occasional gusts of wind were a welcome break.

Walking through this scene were two horses, their hooves softly clunking against the earth. Abel rode Kayou, and Mia rode...her and Kuolan's foal, Gingetsu. Force of habit had Mia ready to scream "giddyup!" at a moment's notice.

Coincidentally, at the sight of Mia's face, Kuolan had let out the most defeated of sighs.

"Well, Aima did just take him out for a ride. I'm sure he's exhausted." Mia offered herself words of comfort, though she hadn't been thinking about her overindulgence in foods lately. Would she really be okay with summer so quickly approaching...?

Anyway, this was Mia's first ride on Gingetsu, and his gait had Mia giggling happily. *Moons, this horse is such a rascal! Oho! I see he takes after his father.* Mia could sense Gingetsu's overflowing strength from his back, so unlike the elegant Kayou. *You're a fine steed. Oho! I almost want to take you home with me!* With an ebullient laugh, Mia followed after Abel.

Finally, the forest came into view. While yellows and oranges dyed its leaves in the fall, it was now overflowing with the green of life. Walking their horses side by side under a path lit by the sunlight as it trickled through the trees, a serene air naturally formed around them.

"I'm glad the weather is so nice. The stormy skies from just a few days ago feel like a dream," smiled Mia.

"Hm? Oh, yes...right..."

Abel seemed a tad...out of it. He seemed lost in thoughts, and it put Mia on edge. Abel, at his core, was an honest man. On all their previous dates,

he took care to give Mia the proper attention, and he didn't seem so aloof.

Is something wrong with Abel? He had been a bit *off* lately. His expressions were slightly stiff, as if he was nervous. *I thought something might have happened with Miss Valentina, but it doesn't seem like that's the case... I wonder what it could be.*

Mia glared at Abel until...she noticed something. His cheeks were red! And while he made sure to keep his eyes ahead, they would occasionally glance over to Mia as if he was trying to gauge her thoughts. As princess of high-powered gazes, Mia saw right through him.

My, Abel! Are you nervous about our date? No, that would be a bit strange. We've been on plenty of dates, but he's never acted like this before. Which means... The cogs in Mia's brain whirred as they entered full romance mode, leading to a single conclusion. *I'm on a date alone with a horseback prince, and he seems nervous...not to mention there's no one else around in these woods. I feel like I've seen this situation somewhere before... Eek!*

Mia had reached the "truth." *Th-This is exactly the same scene from one of Elise's romance novels! Which means, he m-might be about to...* Mia further managed to scrape together the "truth." *Could he be about to propose?!*

Mia's logic made leaps and bounds, jumping so high it reached the moon. *Th-That's why he's so nervous! N-No, but this is so sudden. What do I do? I can't just...*

As such thoughts had Mia squirming in her seat, Abel suddenly addressed her.

"Mia, there's something I have to say to you..." He stopped his horse, turning to face her. Mia couldn't help but jump a bit in her seat. It had Gingetsu looking back at her as if saying, "What is it?" but she didn't have the composure to pay him any mind.

Abel, moons... H-Here...?

Mia was so nervous she was as stiff as a rock. Watching her, Abel...

"I'd like to announce my ten favorite things about you. Ranked, of course."

...said something utterly ridiculous.

"*Huh*?" Mia was now frozen stiff for a *different* reason.

Abel smiled kindly. "I heard that you've been through a lot lately. You

seemed a bit down, so I had a chat with Sion. He gave me some advice."

"So...you heard this from Sion..." Sion's handsome smile flashed through her mind. *I did hear that Tiona had passed around Elise's manuscript...and if I remember right, there was a scene where someone lists out their favorite things about their lover or something. I see. I think I get it now...*

All the energy flew out of Mia's body, making her as supple as an aurelia washed ashore. In fact, she embodied her jellyfish method of horsemanship so excellently it lightened Gingetsu's steps, causing him to wonder, "Huh? Why's it so much easier to gallop now?"

However, just a moment later, Mia made a realization: *Oh, this...is bad.* She had let her guard down—she had no idea that being praised by your crush could be so embarrassing!

"Well then, let me announce my list. *My Favorite Things about Mia*, starting with number ten: how much of a beauty you are when you eat."

"My, Abel...I wasn't expecting you to have such...eccentric tastes." Being praised for how she looked when chowing down on a meal wasn't exactly...you know. However, despite Mia's bitter smile, Abel continued in earnest.

"Oh... Well, you see, I've seen many high nobles eat only the most appealing parts of a dish and throw the majority away. It's an ugly thing. It shows disregard for the chef and the farmers who grew the ingredients. But, Mia, you always clean your plate, and you look like you enjoy every last bite to your very core. And I find that beautiful."

Faced with such unexpected honesty, Mia couldn't help but grow stiffer —from the fact it was so embarrassing to be watched so carefully, of course. Not to mention his brazen praise of her beauty.

Huh? Mia was bewildered, and she could feel her face begin to flush.

"Number nine," he continued. "How hard you work, and how determined you are."

Ugh... Mia let out an unladylike groan. Of course, most of Mia's utterances were unladylike so this was nothing out of the ordinary, but anyway...

"In your studies, horsemanship, and even swimming, you give everything your all and can master anything. It's something I greatly respect you for, and I hope to follow in your example."

His steadfast gaze had Mia clearing her throat. Mia couldn’t meet his clear eyes or even look at his handsome face. She coughed once again.

Th-This is bad... So bad...!

His words were a destructive force, and the truth behind them only made it worse. If he had said that when she danced, she flew off into the sky, or that the view of her on the legendary winged horse was a sight to behold, for example...she'd be able to bear it. But praising her diligence and hard work? That was something else. It had her thinking, *This person really pays attention to me! He sees how hard I work!* Her cheeks only grew redder.

Plus...he had only reached number *nine* of his ranking! She had to sit through eight more of these! She squeezed her cheeks, thinking, *Th-This is torture!* Still, what adorned her face was a smile.

...Which was only to be expected. She'd never been praised so frankly and seriously before. Not even once. But while Mia's mind was going into overdrive, Abel continued.

"Number eight: how brave you are in situations where one must fight and can't back down. To be honest, this worries me a bit too. I don't want you to do anything dangerous, but...if it comes to it, I want you to at least have me by your side. I'll protect you."

"Abel..."

His words continued, revealing the person he saw Mia to be. At the very least, he saw Mia for who she truly was. And when she realized this, Mia had a moment of inspiration.

Huh? Can't we use this for our current predicament? Seeing one's true essence...giving it proper attention...

A light bulb was beginning to form above Mia's head, and to make sure it wouldn't go out, she put her brain on full power. As she was currently in romance mode, her brain was already on high speed, so upping the ante was simple.

Seeing this, Abel stopped his words, instead only showing a wry grin as he waited for Mia to return from the realm of her thoughts.

Chapter 47: Patricia's Observations

We now find ourselves in the classroom of the Special Elementary Education Course.

"Thus, the Holy Lady and Princess Mia are currently considering countermeasures to handle the situation. So please, do not fret. Remain calm in your actions." Julius stepped down from his podium and met eyes with every single one of his students. "You must not do anything rash, as it will only reflect negatively on those who wish to help us. What you all must do is study as you always have. And quietly, that is. As if nothing were out of the ordinary. I am sure what you will learn through doing so will be of future help to you."

His words were kind and considerate, and Patricia silently listened. But as she did, she examined him. *Why has Mr. Julius not asked if we were the ones who stole the item...?* She couldn't get that doubt out of her mind, for she had not asked the question even once since the incident. *He should be demanding that the culprit step forward. That's what people normally do...but he hasn't.*

His eyes, hidden behind glasses, were kind. But sometimes, Patty had noticed that they took on a melancholic hue. *Is it because he believes us? Could it be empathy? That would make him...careless.*

Kindness, compassion, empathy... Those emotions were nothing but a hole someone could worm their way into. At least, that's how the Serpents saw them, their eyes obsessed with finding weaknesses, taking advantage of them, and manipulating. It was through those eyes that Patty saw the world and the people around her, just as she had once been taught.

Finally, Julius had finished his speech, and he stepped out of the classroom. It was then that a stifled voice rang out, as if its owner had been waiting for the right opportunity. "Hey, Karon. It ain't you, *right*?" Yanna's eyes drilled into the boy's head.

"I told you it's not!" He sulked.

Watching him, Patty made another observation. *That's...most likely true.*

He's scared of trusting people.

Just like that, Patty analyzed the inner thoughts of the boy who had invited Yanna to join him in crime. He was afraid of being betrayed by the happiness that befell him. Thus, he made himself ready for betrayal at any time. Then, he convinced himself that Yanna, who came from a similar background, felt the same—that she didn't trust anybody either. That was easier for him, more comfortable. It meant that his values were shared.

Thus, he didn't steal it. If he stole something, he'd pick something people wouldn't notice so easily.

Those who had grown up in orphanages or the slums would know that it would be hard to exchange a silver plate for money. Rather, stealing something so obviously used by nobles was foolish. There was no way a young kid in rags could be in possession of something like that legally, and thus, the only conceivable outcome was an adult taking it from them.

Only people who haven't lived in the slums wouldn't know this, like nobles... Or maybe, they didn't want any money... In any case, Patty was convinced Karon was innocent.

"Dammit! I thought I would finally stop having to worry about food anymore..." Yanna gritted her teeth in pain. But suddenly, her expression softened, for Kiryl had lovingly grabbed her hand.

With that, Yanna turned her gaze to her other classmates, both forlorn and scared. Even Yanna and the other older members were on the verge of tears.

"Th-There ain't nothing to worry about! Princess Mia is really kind! If we do like Mr. Julius says and just wait patiently, then..." Her words faded into nothingness. Yanna knew perfectly well how hard it was for children like these—more separated from the concept of trust than anyone—to accept such words.

Patty watched over the scene silently. Yanna was desperate to protect her brother, but as a leader, she nervously extended this kindness to the rest of her classmates. Watching her friend, Patty couldn't help but sigh. *If you try to juggle so many things at once, one day, you'll have to let go of everything. I...won't let that happen to me.*

Patty closed her eyes, imagining the face of a young boy both enervated and emaciated—her younger brother, Hannes. *I need the knowledge of the Serpents to save him. That's why...I have to become one.*

He was her motive. To save the last family member she had left, she clung to the knowledge of the Chaos Serpents. In all honesty...Patty wasn't fond of the Chaos Serpents. For the sake of their ideals, anyone in front of their eyes—even a pair of young siblings—were necessary sacrifices. If Patty told them Yanna and Kiryl were her friends, they'd surely be taken as hostages and forced to do what they wished to not.

Or maybe, the Serpents would kill Yanna and Kiryl in front of her very eyes to plunge her into the depths of despair. In any case, Patty wouldn't like the outcome.

The Serpents spread our roots among the weak. It's impossible to run from our poison.

The high-pitched voice of her Serpent teacher reverberated through Patty's head. No matter how hard she tried to cover her ears, they made their way through, binding themselves on to Patty's heart. So far, Patty had trained under three different Serpents. All of them were melancholic with voices that twisted themselves around her ears.

However, her current teacher was a bit...different. *Just what's with Miss Mia?* She declared herself to be the princess of Tearmoon, assuming herself into that role entirely. Still, Patty didn't dislike her. *Ever since I came here, nothing's really made sense. Is she trying to test me?*

In any case, Patty's way forward was clear. She would obediently follow the way of the Chaos Serpents, never stepping off that path.

That's how I can save Hannes.

Only then would she be able to save her only family, Hannes, from illness.

Chapter 48: Straight into the Fire's Sparks...

Having thoroughly nourished her soul with a date with Abel, Mia returned to the academy. Abel's sweet and thoughtful words were like saccharine sugar, melting into her heart and warming her from the inside.

"Oho! It's been quite a while since I've been on a date, and this was simply wonderful. I was able to get a clue how to handle this current issue as well. Abel really is the best!"

Mia chuckled away as she walked the academy's halls. But then, she encountered a scene that had her doubting her own eyes—the troublesome Clemens and his crew were chatting with Yanna, Kiryl, and Patty. And this clearly wasn't *just* a chat. The two boys of Clemens's crew had Yanna standing still in front of them. Or rather, they were making Yanna lower her head at them.

Are they still up to their bullying?!

With an indignant huff, Mia approached...but as soon as she could begin to hear their conversation, she froze. Then, she hurried into an empty classroom, straining her ears to eavesdrop on the conversation.

"Um... Thank...you. You really helped us out." Yanna sounded embarrassed.

Clemens was equally awkward with his words. "No, I mean, I didn't..." He glanced at Yanna, but when he caught sight of the eye peeking through her bangs, he quickly averted his gaze.

As she spied, Mia's head began to tilt. *My, just what is this?*

"Or rather... If you guys don't clean yourselves up, you'll only cause more trouble for Princess Mia. You need to get your heads on straight. Criticism of you is criticism of Her Highness. So anything bad said about you guys is a declaration of war against Tearmoon. We won't stay silent."

My...did Clemens do something to help them?

Given the conversation, that seemed to be the case. In other words, he

was protecting Yanna and others from derisive claims that they were the ones who stole the silver sacrament.

Or really, he's saying in a roundabout way that they'll step in if they need to...

Having deciphered this Clemensese, a smile began to creep onto Mia's countenance as she hurried away from the scene.

So, they're protecting the weak. Miss Rafina will eat this up. Mia gave a satisfied nod before grimacing. *But this has its dangers as well.*

From what Mia could tell, Patty was a quite notable suspect. If Patty was determined to be the culprit, those currently defending the SEEC program would stop. Instead, they'd be boiling with rage for having been forced to face such shame.

Miss Rafina and the rest of the student council will face criticism as well. If we make one wrong move, that anger could end up pointed at me.

Rafina had grown quite soft as of late, but an angry Rafina was a scary Rafina. Lions, at first glance, are adorable. Once they open their mouth, you see their fangs.

I'll have to deal with this quickly.

Mia knew well how important it was to make the first move...and preferably, the move before that. To avoid a revolution, the flames must be extinguished while they are still only sparks. Or rather, what was most important is wetting the ground thoroughly before there was any fire at all. Given the aurelia was Mia's spirit animal, she and water were pals.

I've got a hint. It'll all be fine. After trying to convince herself of this, she began to get her thoughts on the matter straight. *First, if we assume Patty is the culprit, using the Serpents as a scapegoat isn't the best of plans.*

For one thing, the culprit would be a girl Mia herself brought here. Even if using the Serpents would protect the whole of the SEEC class, it was doubtful Rafina would completely turn the other way. In fact, Sion would certainly at least be giving her a stern glare.

Patty has been trained by the Serpents, so it doesn't make sense to place the blame on another Serpent. In any case, using any scapegoat would only be fodder the Serpents could use against us.

The hubris of nobility and kings was a weakness that needed to be shielded from Serpent eyes. Thus, Julius's plan was out. Still, it would also be impossible to find the real culprit and clear the SEEC program's name

that way. In which case...

Even if we don't find the culprit, we'll redirect the pitchforks being pointed at the SEEC program and create a situation where there'll be no repercussions even if Patty is found to be the culprit. That's the important thing.

Proudly declaring that the students of the Special Elementary Education Course weren't criminals was risky. If people found out it was Patty behind all this, they would probably criticize Mia, saying, "She just declared their innocence to hide the fact it was someone *she* brought here who committed the crime!" That was something Mia wanted to avoid at all costs. Thus...

"It seems I'll have to call an assembly to explain the whole situation after all!" Her mind made up, Mia rushed to find Rafina.

Chapter 49: Once This Is All Over...It'll Raise Someone's Something Flag

Now the evening of the same day, Rafina was currently deep in thought at the unexpected conversation Mia had brought her way.

"So you plan to summon all the students to an assembly and share your thoughts on the matter... As long as we find the culprit, that should be enough to clear the names of those in the Special Elementary Education Course. However, you're saying that this is inconsequential, yes?"

Rafina was asking for mere confirmation, and Mia responded with a meek nod. "Yes, well... What I was hoping was that this time...we find a way for the rest of the students to be satisfied with the current situation even if the culprit *is* a member of the SEEC program."

Rafina had gone for a sip of her tea, but she now froze. Then, she looked at Mia. This, of course, caused Mia to panic. She flapped her arms in front of her face. "Oh, I mean, I do believe in the children of the SEEC program of course! It's just that..."

"There's no need to explain, Mia. I know exactly what you mean." Now, Rafina had finished bringing her cup to her lips, and she gently blew on it to cool it down. She knew exactly what Mia Luna Tearmoon, her dear friend known by her epithet of the Great Sage of the Empire, was trying to say (at least, she thought she did). The formation of the SEEC program was a way of assaulting the Serpents. Orphans and other children of the slums were easy targets for them, as they were counted among the weak. In the case of famine or other disasters that could befall a country, they were likely to be the first cast away.

However, Mia was offering these children an education, and thus, a means to escape their position. The Chaos Serpents were an infectious thought that inflicted those who are hopeless and believe they are unseen. By giving them hope, Mia was neutralizing their poison. Rather than the venom that leads to destroying order, Mia was offering the distressed the

antidote of hope.

Of course, such efforts could not be limited to Saint-Noel Academy. If they could not offer the same helping hand to all the oppressed children of the continent, their efforts were meaningless.

“To realize your vision, we mustn’t limit our efforts to children of perfect moral integrity,” Rafina continued. “And I doubt those currently gathered here have never turned to crime.”

To those raised in the slums, crime was a necessary way of life. If there was nothing to eat, food had to be stolen. In that cruel world, refusing to do so would only mean death. It was only natural that some of the students had turned to sin in order to survive. Even had they not been involved in this current theft, that fact alone would be fodder for attacks against the SEEC program, for those who stood against Mia would be willing to make use of anything they could.

Mia must be trying to counteract that. She’s not only thinking about the students who are currently here, but the ones who will come in the future.

Rafina nodded softly. “That is what you wish to call an assembly for... I understand now.”

“Yes, I absolutely must speak to the whole student body.”

Saint-Noel Academy was a gathering spot for young nobles who would later lead the continent’s next generation, and Mia knew exactly how she could utilize this fact. What they learned here would be carved into their hearts, and one day, they would graduate and return to their countries, using that information to better the world. Mia (at least, the Mia inside Rafina’s head) believed that firmly. Rafina found it incredibly reassuring, but at the same time, she found shame in not having made use of this earlier herself.

“I doubt the Chaos Serpents would overlook such trouble inside Saint-Noel Academy. While it is hard for us to judge how much power the Serpents currently have, it is best we act expediently.” Rafina smiled at Mia. “I will offer any assistance you ask of me. But...just what exactly are you planning?”

Mia put on a profound grin. “There is nothing to worry about, Miss Rafina. I will handle this situation.” Then, she gave an incredibly confident nod.

After Mia had departed from Rafina’s quarters, Rafina summoned

Santeri, the man in charge of the island's security.

"What is it you need, Lady Rafina?"

"About what I asked of you earlier, there is no need to rush things."

"Then..."

"Exactly. We will not have to denounce the culprit for all to see."

"I see. What excellent news." After a bow of his head, Santeri went to leave. However, Rafina stopped him.

"Oh, but I do want you to continue searching for the culprit, of course. It's just that there is no hurry." For a moment, Julius's kind smile popped into Rafina's mind, and she muttered to herself. "It appears that all will be resolved smoothly thanks to Mia, but... Hm. This is quite the predicament..."

She let out a troubled sigh. Then, her eyes passed over a letter on her desk. They froze. Aima had delivered the letter earlier in the day, and its contents...were an invite to a horseback date with Malong!

"Once this is all resolved, I'd love to go on a long horse ride again. Perhaps I could invite Mia. Oh, that's right... I could make those horse-shaped sandwiches as well. I'll invite Mia, and some others, like the children of the SEEC program, perhaps." Her eyes lost focus as she stared in front of her. "Once this incident is resolved, that is... Yes, it will all be resolved nicely..."

However, Rafina wasn't so sure of that fact. Thanks to this utterance, it seemed like someone's *something* flag had been raised. But as for who that someone was and what that something was? Only the Holy Deity knows.

Chapter 50: Embodying Unwavering Authority—It Is I, Stupid Four-Eyes!

Two days after Mia's talk with Rafina, an assembly of the entire student body was held in the cathedral. The only two speaking at this event were Mia and Rafina, and the students of the SEEC program sat at the front, facing the older students. Among the crowd were Abel, Sion, and the other members of the student council. Along with the students who supported Mia's run for president and the other Sunkland nobles heralded by Sion, they would work to create an atmosphere favorable to Mia.

If anything unforeseen happens, I'll have them take care of things. There shouldn't be any problems here. Well, there *was* a slight problem—the fact that Bel had overslept and was now late. Both her and Citrina being absent could potentially cause some trouble. *Well, only some minor trouble. I don't think I'll need any of Citrina's antidotes, so things should be fine.*

Just as Mia was thinking this to herself, Rafina's voice reverberated through the room. "Well then, let us begin this assembly. We've called this meeting to discuss the case of the stolen silver sacrament. Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon has some words, so please listen carefully."

Rafina flashed them all an innocent smile, which for some reason...felt almost *coercive* to Mia. Rafina came over to Mia, offering a wink.

Oh yes, Rafina made sure to set the scene so that my words will have their maximum power. Now it's my time to shine!

Mia stood and fixed the wrinkles in her uniform. Then, she took something out of her pocket—a symbol of authority! Yes. Fake glasses. Mia looked through them, muttering an enchantment to herself three times. "I am Stupid Four-Eyes, I am Stupid Four-Eyes, I am...Stupid Four-Eyes?" Suddenly, she opened her eyes. "Yes! *I* am Stupid Four-Eyes!"

In a flash, as if to solidify the idea that she had become Stupid Four-Eyes (aka Ludwig), she put on the glasses, embodying the soul of the Empire's greatest source of knowledge.

I feel like I've got all of Ludwig's wisdom now! Hmph, I should test this. I need to do some math... Feeling that she had become a genius, she began to solve the math problem she had battled with all morning in her head. She tried, but... *No, now's not the time for this.*

She remembered what was important! This was no time to be solving equations—something dire was at hand. She definitely had not realized the problem was still difficult, nor was she wondering if she had truly become smart. In no way had she begun to question herself for finding the problem incredibly laborious even though she had just learned how to solve it this morning. Nope. The Great Sage of the Empire simply always knew how to set priorities.

With that, she once again fired herself up with a hefty "Hmph!" and took to the stage. "Greetings, everyone. I first want to thank you all for gathering here today."

She slowly panned her eyes across the room.

Mia could not discern any hostility on the countenances of the students who had gathered, nor were they currently tinted with mistrust.

I suppose for now they're trying to wait and see. Or perhaps they're just confused.

Based on the current ambience, Mia made a deduction: the students probably weren't serious about trying to put an end to the SEEC program. There were few ready to make any real efforts or tangible changes for their cause. Of course, there may still be backlash at Mia and the other's plans, as well as dissatisfaction and rejection. Still...

The only effort they're willing to make is putting those feelings to words, like gossiping about it with their friends. I'm certain of that.

That was minimal malice, a feeling too small to place any real burden on their minds and simply an act to vent their frustration. At the same time, should the air in the room grow charged, it was possible that it would beckon an attack on the children of the SEEC program—that it could ferment into an attitude that violence was okay given that these children were "evil." Even casually hinted at exasperation could morph into brutality.

And if the SEEC children fight back, there would be no clean resolution to the situation. I need to do my best here to avoid that and *make sure it's fine if Patty is revealed to be the culprit!*

To avoid revealing her questionable sense of justice, she would drive in the nail before that happened! Thus, she would present—and force—her reasoning on everyone here!

She took a deep breath. Then, she turned her eyes to the children of the Special Elementary Education Course. "I believe in these children. I believe in their purity, their kindness, and their virtuous hearts."

With that daring proclamation...Mia's speech began.

The moment those words reverberated through the hall, all conversation stopped. Unconcealable awe spread across the faces of each student as they sat packed together in the room. Except...of course that didn't happen! They all simply looked confused or angry. Some were even laughing at Mia.

This was an unavoidable outcome. What Mia had stated were simply her own wishes and her own personal stance on the matter. There was no evidence to suggest these students weren't the perpetrators, nor were there

grounds for placing trust in them. This was simply an assertion that Mia believed in them, eliciting whispers of "Even coming from Princess Mia, I could never believe that" or "It's obvious that the children of lowly commoners are the thieves!"

As Mia prayed it wasn't Tearmoon nobles who were saying these things, she softly pushed up her glasses, a symbol of sagacity. This would not perturb her, for she had expected this very outcome.

Once again, Mia began to speak. "I believe that at their core, these children are virtuous, just as every child is! Thus, I am certain that none have ever turned to thieving."

First, she demonstrated her unwavering faith. This inspired some awkwardness among the students in the room, Kiryl and Yanna leading that pack. Still, Mia pretended like she couldn't see them.

"I believe in their virtuous cores. All of you who have shared a meal with them would know that these children are good children."

Those who had taught table manners to the SEEC program—in other words, those who remembered how good it felt to be praised by Rafina for doing so—nodded vigorously. To them, the children of the SEEC program were obedient kids who happily listened to anything they had to say.

"Thus, I do believe that at their cores, these children are virtuous. However..." She repeated this sentiment once again. But knowing this was where the real battle began, she cut herself off and panned her eyes across the room. "However, it is also true that even those of true hearts sometimes turn to crime. Thus, I often wonder...when good children are forced to turn to evil, just who should take responsibility for their crimes?"

Mia now looked at Patty. *Based on how Patty's acted, I doubt she would do anything that would harm Yanna and Kiryl.* After much deliberation, this was the conclusion Mia had reached. It was true that Patty had referred to the stolen item as a "silver plate," which was quite suspicious. Even so... *She could just have imagined a big plate after hearing the words "silver sacrament"! It's possible she just had that image in her head, and the words slipped out.*

Sometimes, thoughts that weren't in your head fell out of your mouth, or something in your environment would coax them out. It's possible she simply envisioned the item as a plate, causing a slip of the tongue. Then, it just happened to match reality. That reality was possible, at least.

If I allow such feeble evidence to make me doubt her...it will be hard to rebuild our sense of trust. It would become impossible for me to save her from the Serpents.

In other words, Mia didn't really mind even if it turned out that Patty was the culprit. Faced with Mia's honest trust, she'd start to feel guilty about the whole thing. Then, Mia could just say, "I forgive you" to instead use that guilt to her advantage! She'd be able to easily get brownie points with Patty and build more trust between them. It was a tempting scenario.

Thus, my position needs to be unwavering trust in the children of the SEEC program. What's important is limiting any damage that would come from my trust being betrayed.

Now certain of her goal, Mia perfected her argument, sharpening it into a point. It was just like a spear...or a pointed mushroom.

"Of course, the culprit must take responsibility for their actions. However...those of us who attend Saint-Noel Academy should not think that puts an end to the situation. There was something about their circumstances that forced those of virtue to turn to crime. If we are to let that situation remain as is, then as those who are at the top, we must take responsibility as well, no?"

Mia met eyes with each student of the SEEC program. Then, she approached them, softly placing her hand on Yanna's. "If, for example, Yanna stole food in order to ease the hunger pains of her starving brother...I would place blame on their parents who forced them into that situation. Furthermore, I would blame the rulers of their country who forced their parents into such harrowing circumstances."

As she spoke these words, a thought passed in her mind, as if she was confirming the situation. *These two are from Ganudos Port Country...*

Then, she once again began to speak. "Or, if they feared for their future and stole in order to obtain necessary funds, I would blame their local lord who made their future so uncertain."

She glanced at Kiryl, then Karon, who was sitting beside him. *This is Yanna's younger brother, and this is Karon, a boy sent from an orphanage in Belluga. And the children who come from other countries...*

Of course, Mia knew exactly where each of the students had hailed from. There were none from Tearmoon among them, not even one! Thus, Tearmoon had a clean slate! It was free of blame! Covered by such

assurances, Mia continued to gleefully talk away.

“I detest crime, and I detest thievery. However, if a child with a good heart were to turn to crime, I would not hate or despise them; I would simply teach them that what they did was wrong. My anger would be directed only toward the crime of thievery itself and the situation that forced this child down that path.” Mia once again looked toward everyone in the room. “It is the job of rulers to make the people virtuous. Ridiculing commoners as ‘base’ or ‘lowly’ is to ridicule their own rule. I would never let my people starve, nor would I scorn them for expressing their dissatisfaction.”

Mia’s words were convincing. She had set an example at her Birthday Festival, showing the truth there was behind calling it the princess’s “Festival of Debauchery.”

“As students of Saint-Noel Academy, I believe we must take that stance and look with those eyes.”

After that brazen declaration...Mia grinned. Her claim, in other words, was that they needed to shift the blame. This wasn’t a sin for the children to bear themselves, but a sin for those who forced these children to lives of crime. The onus was on the nobles of the countries these children hailed from. *That* was her argument.

People were throwing stones at the SEEC program, saying it was them to blame. But Mia threw those stones right back in their faces! Mia was asking a question to all the noble children who attended this school, that question being, “These kids might be bad, but...aren’t your parents bad too?” There were few people who’d hear such a question and insist that their country alone was different.

Then, Mia would share her true inner thoughts with no falsehoods...albeit some slight reinterpretation. What really moved souls was the truth! Thus, she declared it with fervor!

“Even should these children do bad, I will not blame them. Similarly, I will not blame them for any evil they’ve committed in their pasts. Instead, I will simply encourage them to reflect and teach them that they must not commit those same acts again. Then...I will reflect on myself and ask if I have ever forced the virtuous to sin.”

Mia put her hand to her heart as she spoke. That question was always running through her mind. That question of course being, *Are my actions*

leading to a revolution? Am I inspiring the people to turn to guillotine making? Constantly questioning whether she was summoning any guillotines her way was Mia's style. She just was translating these questions into terms others could understand.

She continued passionately. "Graduates of this academy will largely go on to support their countries. Thus, we must always be considering this. To maintain the people's virtue, those who rule must labor tirelessly and persevere. Failing to properly instruct a child is a sin of the parent, but failing to properly instruct the people is *our* sin as leaders."

With that, Mia wiped the sweat from her brow. In that brief moment of silence, someone's applause reverberated through the hall. It was the Holy Lady Rafina. Through her support, Mia's stance was not simply her own position, but the position of Saint-Noel Academy.

This was staged, of course. Mia had asked her for this favor beforehand. But backed by Rafina's authority, Mia offered her final remarks. "While you all are here at Saint-Noel's, I want you to learn that. Then, I want you to make use of this experience once you return to your home countries. As those who despise thievery and adore justice, I'm sure your hearts will lead your countries well. I just pray that in the near future when you all return as rulers, there will be none among you who dismiss your people as base."

Those words transferred the blame from the present students to their future selves. In other words, Mia was saying, "I think your parents are to blame here, not you guys! At least not yet. That's for the future, once you're rulers."

Anyone getting called out like that for their evils would get defensive. However, if they were instead told their parents were good-for-nothings but were still all right for now, they wouldn't feel bad at all! And if there was anyone super proud of their parents out there, they would just assume that Mia's speech didn't apply to them. The only students who would get offended by Mia's speech were those who were already thinking their parents didn't do enough to help orphans and the poor.

The next moment, applause erupted throughout the room. Of course, this was staged as well. The members of the student council and other of Mia's associates had been planted to instigate this applause. But before one could blink, it had filled the entire cathedral. Mia gave a sigh of relief.

Thus concluded the declaration that would later form the cornerstones of the continent's educational doctrine.

Our love shall not be determined by thy child's actions, but thy child's nature. Shall their actions be evil, we shall teach them the wrongs of their ways. Then, we shall examine ourselves as those who paved their path to evil...

Mia's words would later be known as "the Three Secrets to Gold," as not only did they raise children to have hearts of gold, the educational revolution they inspired within each country were of a golden standard.

But that's a tale for another day.

Chapter 51: You Can't Fool Bel!

"Hurry, Bel! The assembly is going to start soon."

Rushed by Citrina, Bel ran down the hall. "I'm sorry, Rina. I overslept!"

Bel had stayed the previous night in Citrina's room. Never tiring of conversation, the two had stayed up quite late.

It was so fun! I lost myself in our chats. I need to be more careful in the future... Despite Bel's thoughts, she didn't panic, for this assembly was led by her amazing Grandmother Mia. *She's always prepared for anything! She hasn't asked me to do anything specific today either!*

Still, oversleeping and being late to the event was hardly befitting of a princess. "Yup, I should be careful! Princesses need to sleep early!" Her Grandmother Mia always made sure to go to bed at a reasonable time. Thus, Bel was now set to follow in her example.

Just then, a figure passed before them.

"Hm? That's..." Glasses adorned his amicable countenance. "Rina, isn't that Mr. Julius...?"

Yes, it was Julius, instructor of the Special Elementary Education Course. He was headed for the back of the academy. There wasn't anything especially suspicious of that fact, considering he was a teacher and thus not obligated to attend the assembly. He could also have some teacherly work to do. But for some reason...it weighed on Bel. There was something strange going on.

And luckily, there was someone who put Bel's thoughts into words. Citrina watched him go with a puzzled look. "How odd. Why is he not at the cathedral? Given his character, Rina finds it hard to believe he wouldn't be interested in the assembly."

Julius was known to be a kind teacher who cared deeply for his students. At least, that's how he seemed to Bel ever since they were first introduced. As this had been after she returned from her visit with Valentina, they hadn't been acquaintances for long. However, that impression of him had taken up root in her heart. Would he really not attend this assembly when it

had the power to decide the fates of his students? Was he really not concerned about what Mia would decide to do with the children? To Bel, that didn't seem to match his character at all.

Seeing Bel was equally as baffled, Citrina lowered her voice to a whisper. "Hey, Bel. If you had to steal something precious, what would you do?"

"Hm. Well..." Bel took a moment to consider the question. "I'd super sneakily climb over the castle walls and slip inside, making sure no one would see me. Then...I would knock out the guards before they could even see me..." Bel reenacted this moment in the air to prove her point.

"Tee hee! If you were Dion Alaia...or the wolfmaster, or anyone else with superior skills, I think that would be possible." Citrina brought a hand to her mouth and giggled. It was the smile of an angel, but it quickly turned into one of the devil. "But that'd be impossible for normal girls like Rina. So if it were Rina, I'd light a fire somewhere close by."

"Huh? A fire?" Bel wasn't quite following.

"Then, Rina would steal it once everyone was busy with putting out that fire. If the fire was big enough that no one would notice something going missing, Rina wouldn't be caught. They might not even notice until I was long gone... Don't you think so?"

"You mean..."

Citrina watched Julius sharply as he departed. Bel now understood why.

"I see... Hmph."

Bel, too, now watched Julius. His face had been serene, yet troubled. And on that face...was a shiny pair of glasses!

"Now that you mention it...he's super suspicious!" proclaimed Bel. "He's super fishy!"

Bel was not fooled by the authority of glasses. After observing his collected expression, Bel had seen through to his suspicious nature. Glasses were not enough to inspire unconditional faith in Bel. But why? Was it because she was smarter than Mia? No, but the answer was simple. It was because Ludwig never wore glasses when he was teaching Bel!

That's right, glasses made it hard to see the small print of textbooks. Thus, he removed his glasses for his lessons. Bel had never come to associate Ludwig's glasses with his lectures, and therefore, she didn't feel they were a symbol of absolute authority. Bel was free of the spectacles'

spell.

"He is suspicious. Shall we follow him?"

The two looked at each other and nodded. Then, they were off.

Chapter 52: The Great Sage Mia's Hopeless Delusion

Her speech now concluded, Mia removed the glasses from her face. With a sigh, she bowed and elegantly strutted back to her seat. Rafina took her place at the podium, offering the necessary follow-up.

"Just as Mia has stated, the student council will defend the Special Elementary Education Course. While we firmly believe they are not responsible for this incident, even should they stain their hands with evil...we shall forgive them. Of course, we will also teach them to never turn to the same ways again, striving at the same time to create a world in which they won't have to."

Enjoying the high of a job well-done and the fatigue that comes with it, Mia half listened to Rafina's speech.

"Good work out there, milady!" Anne approached with a cup of cold Belluga apple juice. Its refreshing acidity and pleasant sweetness spread through Mia's tongue, eliciting a sigh.

"Thank you, Anne. All that talking had left me parched. You really are considerate."

"Thank you for the praise. And...that was a truly wonderful speech. I was very moved."

"My, thank you. I hope the others feel the same..." Mia returned her gaze to the assembly hall. The audience didn't seem hostile. Instead, they somehow seemed to accept her words favorably. Next, she looked at the SEEC program. Yanna was in tears. She had probably been pushing herself for a long time. Having lived alone with her brother for so many years, it must have been easy for her to imagine what this ruling would mean for them. Now, she had suddenly been relieved from all that pressure. Despite the brave front she put on, tears now dribbled down her cheeks, and she diligently used both hands to brush them away. Kiryl simply watched her, worried.

This fact had moved the room in Mia's favor. Yanna was rather adorable when she made sure to keep herself presentable. Her brother had quite the cute face as well. These siblings had no one to back them, but the elder did her best to always provide, and the younger did his best to encourage the older. It would inspire sympathy and protectiveness in anybody.

Plus, Yanna's tears had spread like wildfire; the whole of the SEEC program was now weeping. However, they made sure they were silent as they did so, biting their lips to hold back their sobs. They were the embodiment of the trampled weak.

Should their cries leak out, causing even the most minor of inconveniences to those around them, they would be beaten. Thus, they made themselves as small as possible so they wouldn't be seen—so they wouldn't be found by any who would hurt them. It was a habit taught from their harsh environment, and to the noble children who had likely never set foot in the slums, they seemed pitiable. Before, the children of the slums had just been balls of filth. But for the first time, these noble children saw them as children the same as themselves. With that, there were none who would further vilify them.

At the same time, their tears inspired a thought in Mia. She gave a sigh of deep emotion. *Oho! I see they are quite moved by my speech. Making them cry is proof of the power of words!* Mia was quite satisfied with herself. *I bet I would make a talented poet!* And just like that, Mia's delusions took flight.

I could write stories that would move the masses or use my talent to write poetry. I had never quite noticed it myself, but...yes! I should have Elise help me out... Mia was about to head down the path of a lyricist. *Anyway, this should be enough to calm the fires. Though if we want to reach a resolution, we'll need the perpetrator to reveal themselves...*

Mia had made it so that regardless of the children's past crimes, they could not be blamed. Instead, she alluded that it was the fault of the lords who ruled where the children had hailed from. As the children had just come to Saint-Noel's, she argued that those experiences were still affecting their psyches.

However, that only referred to crimes they had already committed. Admitting their crimes and coming forward was on a whole different level. Should the assembly conclude and none come forward to admit they had

committed the crime, the sparks of criticism would continue to fly. Other nobles could criticize her by saying, “Despite Princess Mia’s generosity, these lowly nobles can’t even admit their wrongs!”

Should one of the children of the SEEC program be the culprit, they’ll need to admit it and return this silver sacrament... But if it’s Patty, I doubt she’ll do so. If it’s one of the others, I think they probably will... Well, if they do, I doubt I’ll have to announce their name to the whole school. I can just say we found the culprit and leave the rest to their imaginations. Mia once again let out a sigh. *In any case, my work here is done. Ugh...this was exhausting. I used my head too much.*

However, Mia was also in the mood for some self-praise. *As a reward, I should be able to have the sweetest of cakes prepared and eat it to my heart’s content! I’ve been doing my best to avoid sweets lately, but it should be fine to scarf down some tasty snacks covered in whipped cream, no? I should be able to treat myself, right?*

Mia was headed down the path of hopeless delusion.

As soon as Rafina had stepped down from the podium, Monica approached her. After a brief conversation, they headed for Mia. “It seems like the culprit has made their move.”

“...Huh?”

While Mia’s delusion of tasty cake had been continuing to balloon in her head, it had suddenly popped.

Chapter 53: Curious...ly Amazing Detective Bel Is on the Case!

Bel and Citrina were on his tail. Julius rushed down the halls, and the two girls silently followed after. The hallways were empty, making it necessary for them to leave quite a distance between themselves and their target to avoid being spotted.

"Bel, this way," directed Citrina in a whisper. Bel jogged after her.

Rina seems to be really used to this... Citrina moved from one shadow to another, making sure her footsteps were silent. Bel looked to her in awe. *She just told me that normal girls can't scale castle walls, but I bet she could...*

If her hand slipped, causing her to fall, her husband would be there to catch her. Then, they would stare into each other's eyes, rouge tinting their cheeks... Bel grinned to herself as she imagined this scenario.

Citrina glanced back at her. "What is it, Bel? Did something funny happen?"

"Huh? Oh, no. It's nothing! Anyway, where do you think Mr. Julius is headed?" Bel covered herself with a hearty laugh and returned her eyes to Julius. He was headed for a deserted hallway past all the classrooms. Bel realized she had never come this way before. When Bel had first arrived in this world, she had lived secretly in the academy. However, she made herself scarce and only really traveled to the dining hall to steal some food. Even then, she had never been this way.

"There's no one here. Is he really planning to start a fire...?"

"Oh, there's no need to worry about that. There isn't anything flammable down this way. Rina had Rafina help me make sure of that." Citrina gave a triumphant grin. Unlike Bel, she had already scouted out this area, making sure to deal with anything likely to catch flame as she did.

"I can always count on you, Rina!" Still, Bel secretly wondered why Rina had come to investigate this area in the first place. "Huh...?"

However, that doubt lasted only a moment. Her mind quickly turned to something else. Bel's grandmother was a lover of horses, and what defined horses? Their long necks! Her grandmother's horse-mania had been passed down to Bel, expressing itself as a predilection for rubbernecking. Fueled by her blood, Bel did just that, turning her neck around and...tilting it, confused.

"Huh? Where did Mr. Julius go?"

Chasing after the man, the two now found themselves in an old hall. It was slightly smaller than the one used for the ball to welcome new students, and it smelled slightly dusty. Currently, the room appeared to be used for storage, as it was littered with broken desks and tables which had once been used for Holy Communion.

Is he hiding somewhere...?

But there was nowhere to hide. Even if this was a simple storage space, it was highly organized, leaving only two or three places fit for concealing oneself. After quickly checking those spots, it became clear that Julius was nowhere to be found.

"Hey, Bel? Doesn't this seem suspicious?" With a scowl, Citrina pointed to the wall in front of her. It was adorned with a giant portrait of the Holy Lady herself.

"Wow! It's so big!" Bel looked up the portrait, her mouth hanging open in awe. Rafina was roughly double the scale in this picture. In other words, it was huge.

"It's really strange to have such a lavish painting of Miss Rafina in storage like this." Citrina gave a frustrated groan, but Bel had a differing opinion.

Auntie Rafina isn't a fan of her portraits, after all... Bel could see her now, looking completely despondent as she signed pictures of herself. Plus, the painting before them was completely gaudy. White wings spread from her back (as was typical of depictions of Rafina) as she flew through the night sky littered with stars like diamonds. Glittering constellations were her servants. They adorned her feet, and the crescent moon made her long hair shimmer. All in all, she was painted quite beautifully.

Except for one part, that is. Her eyes seemed to have no focus, as if they were lacking in life, or perhaps just enthusiasm. The painter had skillfully captured the tepidness of their model's heart.

I think I'd have a hard time with such an exaggerated image of myself too. I probably wouldn't want people looking at it either.

Even a lover of praise like Bel thought so. Thus, it didn't seem strange that such a picture was hung in an old storeroom.

As these thoughts ran through Bel's head, Citrina examined the surroundings of the painting, looking for anything that seemed strange... Then, as if she had hit upon a sudden realization, she brought both her hands to the painting's frame and lifted it off the wall.

"Look out!"

It threw off her balance, and Bel rushed to help her. With great effort, the two managed to remove the painting, revealing...

"Wow!" Bel's eyes were the size of saucers. On the wall hidden behind the painting was a square hole, revealing a narrow staircase.

"Hm, a hidden staircase There were marks on the wall left by the painting, so Rina thought there might be something..." Citrina had removed the painting half expecting to find nothing. Surprise now colored her face.

"Do you think this is where Mr. Julius went?" Bel tried to peek upward, but the stairs were spiraled, blocking her view. "It doesn't seem like there's anywhere else he could be hiding... Should we head up? I don't think there could be anywhere dangerous in Saint-Noel's." With that, Bel slipped inside the wall.

"Ah, wait, Bel! Rina will go first." Citrina rushed after, coming up to her side.

"Huh? You're not going to put the picture back up?" Bel looked behind her.

"No... If anything were to happen—if we leave this corridor revealed—someone might realize something is wrong. But..." Citrina flashed one of her angelic grins. "Rina doesn't think that'll happen. We didn't run into any guards."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Shall we go?"

The two began to climb the staircase.

"Just what is this place? Why is it here?" Bel examined her surroundings.

Rafina gave a meek nod. "Did you notice that at the entrance, there was a door made of iron bars? It was open, but... Oh. Look. That window's the

same.” Citrina pointed to an open skylight, enforced by tough bars. “I think this is a place to lock people away.”

“Lock people away? Oh, look!”

A massive door suddenly appeared in front of them. In it was a window similarly blocked with iron bars, perhaps meant for surveillance. They were still unable to see inside the room, but...it was clear someone was in there.

“So people are really locked away here... Ah!” Bel had approached the door, but suddenly, someone reached out from the shadows, grabbing her arms and restraining them behind her back.

“Bel!” Citrina tried to approach, but her feet stopped. Her eyes were sewn to the face peering out from behind Bel’s.

“Dear me. I had thought you were servants of Lady Rafina, but it’s just you two...” The man who had captured Bel wore a kind smile.

“Mr. Julius... Why?”

Julius shrugged his shoulders, his expression troubled. “I just needed...”

“My, my. I hear quite the commotion out there.” That voice reverberated from the room Bel had just tried to peer into.

In the next moment, a woman's face appeared in the window. Her eyes looked around as she examined the scene, and once they had landed on Citrina's face, they glowed with joy.

"My, if it isn't Lady Citrina. It's been quite the while."

The imprisoned woman twisted her grin into a smile. It was Barbara.

To Be Continued in Part 5: A Princess's Respite II

Ninety-Nine Days before Bel's Return

This is a story from after Bel had once passed.

Once again, Mia and her friends had returned to Saint-Noel Academy, and they bore heavy damage. But the one who felt it the most was Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon. Convinced her friend had died from an arrow meant for her, she was but an empty shell. She spent her days locked in her room.

"I'm coming in, Rina." Mia entered the curtain-drawn room, gloomy and dark from the lack of sunlight. Atop the bed was Citrina, lying in a daze.

However, Citrina did not offer much of a reaction. Her hand squeezed the troya it held, making it the only tell of her inner thoughts.

"You still must eat, you know," Mia once again called out to her and turned her eyes to the dishes on the table. The food she had brought the day before was still there, untouched.

That soup looked so scrumptious. What an unfortunate waste.

Despite her angelic appearance, Citrina was quite the glutton. And yet she had not touched her food. It proved the depth of the wound she now bore.

I would really like to tell her all the truth about Bel, but...

It seemed uncertain that those words would reach her in her current state, especially with how complicated the story was. If Mia just said, "She's my granddaughter from the future!" there was a good chance Citrina wouldn't believe her. If she didn't tread the conversation carefully, Citrina might even poison her food for making fun of her.

It would actually be quite comforting if she had the energy to do so... In any case, I'll have to tell her eventually, but it doesn't appear that now is the time...

With that, Mia stepped into the hallway with a hefty sigh.

"So that failed as well, Miss Mia." Esmeralda had accompanied Mia, but it was only now she opened her mouth. After the events in Sunkland, she had temporarily returned to Lunatear. But once she heard of what happened

to Citrina, she hurried right over to Saint-Noel's. "How useless I do feel. Well, it's not unimaginable... The two were so close. A sudden parting would cause quite the shock," said Esmeralda with a frown.

It should be clarified that all Esmeralda had been told was that Bel had gone far away, for it would have caused too much trouble to explain that Bel had died.

Esmeralda can be quite emotional, and she and Bel aren't complete strangers. There was a good chance hearing of Bel's death would have been a shock to her as well. Mia was just trying to be considerate.

"I brought so many sweets from Lunatear to try to cheer her up, but alas..." Apparently, seeing such a pained face on the younger Citrina had inspired some sisterly love in Esmeralda. Not only did she bring specially ordered sweets for Citrina, she offered kind words of comfort; it was a rare instance of philanthropy from the famously selfish noblewoman. However, Citrina had offered little response. "I suppose she wishes for us to leave her be. She doesn't appear to be willing to listen." Esmeralda sighed with a scowl. "I am quite worried for her, but perhaps we should leave her alone for now..." She moved a hand to her cheek and sighed once again.

Mia, too, was conflicted. "I suppose..."

Perhaps it was best to leave Citrina be for now. Only time could heal wounds of the heart. For a moment, Mia began to think that what was currently best for Citrina was some solitary silence, but then...Mia shook her head.

"No..." A precious memory suddenly resurfaced in Mia's mind. It was from the previous timeline—from days spent locked in the dungeon. The day she had learned her father would be executed at the guillotine.

"Father will be...executed?"

It was a guard who had informed Mia of Emperor Matthias Luna Tearmoon's impending death. "That's right. We'll finally be able to pass punishment on that vile emperor in the Holy Deity's stead." There was something about his voice that made him sound tipsy. He glared at Mia. "And you're up next. Prepare yourself, Mia Luna Tearmoon."

Despite his words, Mia's execution would be much further down the line. But at the time, Mia had no way of knowing that. Sorrow, despair, and overwhelming fear filled her heart. The man had said she would be next,

and the fear that her death would soon come was all-encompassing. However, one day passed, and then the next. Eventually, her temporary fear had come to pass. Now all that was left was the grief of losing her father.

"So...I shall never be meeting my father again..." That thought was more sorrowful than she could bear. She would never see his annoying grin or be begged to call him "papa" ever again. It was as if there was a weight on her heart, pulling it lower and lower and taking all her will with it.

But then, Anne came to visit.

"Oh, Anne..." Mia apologized. She would never be able to keep her end of the promise they once made. All she could do was lower her head and offer those words.

But faced with Mia's crestfallen state, Anne simply offered frivolous small talk. They promised to one day make castilla together.

That's right. Back then, we didn't talk about anything important, and she didn't offer me any words of comfort either. Anne simply stayed by my side. Mia began to think of what she would have said if she had been in Anne's situation. *Perhaps there are no words to say to a princess who lost her father and was imprisoned to simply await her own execution, despite having done her best to care for her people and having a heart and mind of gold.*

Mia folded her arms in front of her and groaned. Part of this view was objectionable, but anyway...

Because there are no words to say, Anne might have resolved to leave me alone. However... Anne had stayed by her side. She showed Mia sympathy, offering her words and staying close by. It was impossible to put a number on how much the warmth of someone beside her had saved Mia that day.

Mia closed her eyes and spoke. "There are definitely times where people want to be alone. But...even if our words cannot reach her, I believe it's necessary to at least stay by her side."

There were some things that only time could solve. However, Mia thought more was necessary—like simply being present or offering her a silent comforting back rub. She had begun to think that having someone by your side could itself be a form of salvation. Just like Anne had done before, and...

Had she... Had Bel been here, I'm certain she would have done the

same.

Mia let out her breath. “We’ll be back tomorrow, Rina. And the day after that, and the day after that. We’ll keep coming until you’re back on your own two feet.” Mia gently shut the door. She had no idea if those words would reach Citrina, but she wouldn’t stop trying. She’d persevere.

Esmeralda couldn’t help but shake her head. “Well, I guess there’s nothing else for us to do. I’ll stick with you in that promise. There are few chances left for us Etoilines to have our Clair de Lunes here in Saint-Noel Academy. I want her to attend at least twice—no, thrice—more,” she huffed.

“Yes... Oh, by the way, Esmeralda. About those special sweets you brought. It would be a waste to just throw them away. How about the two of us share them?”

“My, we seem to be on the same page! I was thinking I’d propose such myself. Why don’t we invite Ruby as well?”

With that, the two girls noisily departed from before Citrina’s door. Thus, their visits would continue.

It would be another ninety-nine days until Bel’s return.

Two Sisters and Their Friendship of Calculated Interests

“But, Yanna, you’re my big sister...!”

The phrase “big sister” had Patty looking up. She was in a room of bright lights and cacophonous noise—the most lavish dining hall in all the continent, located in Saint-Noel Academy. And it wasn’t just the menu. The students were equally extravagant. There were daughters of nobles, sons of merchants, and any other who would be considered of the highest pedigree each country had to offer, all locked in elegant conversation.

But among these unreachables were a few children who seemed out of place—the students of the Special Elementary Education Course. Watching them, Patty let out a sigh. *Everything went well yesterday thanks to Miss Mia, but they really do stick out...*

Unlike the boys from yesterday, there were currently none trying to pick any blatant fights. However, it was still difficult for the children to adjust to this place. Not for Patty, though. She was able to completely shrink into the scenery, for she had been taught the ways of nobles by the Chaos Serpents. While she had never attended a ball, she was convinced she’d be able to fit right in.

Thus, she was able to eat in peace without rocking the boat. However...

“You’re my big sister! You should eat it instead!”

Patty’s consciousness once again returned to that voice. It was a young boy, and he was talking to his sister who sat beside him. If Patty was remembering right, the sister was Yanna, and the brother was Kiryl. On his plate were some red beans pushed to the farthest edge of the dish.

“Nope! Ya can’t be picky, Kiryl. We’re lucky to be able to eat such a proper meal, so don’t leave a single bite!”

Kiryl groaned his dissatisfaction.

Those beans are a tad spicy. Many kids don’t like them. Hannes doesn’t either...

Patty never intended on forming a relationship with those two. In fact, she had intended on not getting close to anybody in the SEEC program. She even wanted to keep the conversations between her and Mia to a minimum. However...

Once Yanna had looked away, she surreptitiously stole the beans off Kiryl's plate and tossed them into her mouth. Then, she remembered...that she never liked them either.

"Huh?" Kiryl stared back at her.

Patty kept her dislike of the food off her face, maintaining the same blank expression as always. She winked at him. Kiryl responded with a look of awe and admiration.

"Hm? So ya did eat them, Kiryl. Good job."

But once his sister had begun to pat his head, his expression grew complicated. He must have felt guilty. There was something comical about the scene, and the corners of Patty's lips raised ever so slightly.

Then, a face appeared in her mind. It was her younger brother, Hannes. *I hope he's okay...*

She closed her eyes, and he became the only thing she could see. The muscles in his cheeks were tense, and tears trickled down them, threatening to overflow.

"Do you know what you did wrong, Hannes?" A biting voice reverberated through the nursery at House Clausius. The strict words had Hannes's face contorted in fear. The owner of the voice—a maid who served as their instructor—looked into his eyes and continued. "I'm asking you if you know what you did wrong. Did you not hear me?"

Hannes shivered before shaking his head.

"You don't? 'Patty...Patty, Patty.' That is no way for the son of a Marquis to refer to his sister. You must call her 'Patricia.' How many times must I tell you this?" She slammed the wall with her fist before turning her eyes to Patricia. "You understand this. Right, Patricia?"

Her eyes were pure ice, lacking any sense of warmth. When faced with such a gaze, a moment of inattention would have caused Patty to shake. Thus, she took a deep breath before speaking.

"Yes, ma'am." Her voice was but a whisper.

The maid brought her face close to Patricia's and stared into her eyes.

“Hee hee! You took a deep breath to calm your nerves. Excellent. A noble lady must always act with calm and grace.”

What she sought in Patty was the conduct of a perfect noblewoman; the maid had taught her such Serpent philosophies that would allow an empress to ruin her emperor.

After showing a satisfied nod, the maid returned her eyes to Hannes. “You require more education. As punishment for your earlier blunder...you will not be receiving any meals today.”

“Huh...?” Tears began to well in his eyes.

Seeing this, Patricia began to speak. “Pl—” *Please.* But she swallowed that word. There were no actions as meaningless as imploring a Chaos Serpent. Thus, doing so would be foolish. Instead, it would only earn the maid’s ire. Patty could hear the words “You think I’ll listen to your wishes?” in her head. The Serpents did not wish for her to act like a foolish child. To please them, she had to act like a cunning Serpent.

Thus, Patricia changed her words. She took a moment to think before opening her mouth. “My brother...is sickly. Though medicine keeps his condition at bay, I worry that skipping meals would exacerbate his symptoms.”

This put a smile on the maid’s face. “Yes, that would be a reason to continue to provide him with proper meals. Despite his idiocy, it is true he must one day become head of House Clausius.” She began to stroke Patty’s cheek. Then, she squeezed them together and forced their eyes to meet. The maid’s eyes were those of a Serpent, her emotions impossible to read. It caused Patricia’s heart to flutter. “Excellently put, Patricia. In which case... I will allow you to offer *your* food to your brother.”

Her words were cold. Seeing that Patricia’s shoulders had trembled, she gave a full-face grin before continuing. “How wonderful, Patricia. You got exactly what you wanted: meals for your brother. Sometimes, one must hurt themselves for the sake of their goals. That is the Chaos Serpent way.”

Patricia lowered her head in response. She wouldn’t say anything she didn’t have to. There was nothing she could gain from continuing the conversation, for she knew exactly what their instructor was trying to do.

She’s trying to temporarily assure me so she can later thrust me to despair.

That was simply the way of the Serpents, which she, too, had been

taught. It was a means of manipulation. When put in context of her lessons, the maid's intentions were clear.

All of this had been for the sake of turning Patricia into a skilled leader of the Chaos Serpents. Despair was what led to a longing for destruction and chaos. Should Patricia spend her days despairing, she would one day begin to think that this world was worth destroying. And frankly, she was already halfway there. However...

A hand tugged at her clothes. Hannes looked up to her with a pitiful expression.

"It's fine, Hannes. You eat."

"But, Pat— Patricia." As he corrected his words, Patty softly patted his head.

"When it's just the two of us, you can call me Patty, okay?" She flashed him a kind smile.

"I'm hungry..."

After sending Hannes off for dinner, Patricia rubbed her tummy with her small hands. Even though it was just one meal, it was hard to bear for a growing child, even considering how nerve-racking mealtimes were here. In addition to manners, there was much to be taught during meals—how to read the attendees of any dinner party, or how to choose your words carefully to manipulate them, for example. The meals she ate during such lessons never tasted good.

"They were so delicious when mother was still here..." Even though their bread was stale and their soups were mostly broth, the meals were fun and tasty. "How did things come to this...?"

After the day her mother died, fate had begun to tumble her in the wrong direction, and suddenly, she was standing in complete darkness. It encompassed her, and she now wandered it aimlessly alongside her young brother. There was no relaxing anymore, and it chipped away at her heart, causing it to waste away.

Grrrr... Her stomach let out a forlorn cry. Patricia rubbed it as she stood up.

"I should read."

In order to act like a cunning Serpent, it was recommended to her that she gather as much knowledge as possible. Thus, she read all the books she

could get her hands on. She thought that this way, if she ever opposed the Chaos Serpents, she would have some tricks up her sleeves.

"Huh...? What's that?" Patricia suddenly realized a light coming from the corner of the room...straight from her bookshelf. "Is this another trick?"

Fearfully, Patricia approached. Then suddenly...

"Hey."

As Patty was leaving the dining hall, a voice stopped her. She turned around to find Yanna and Kiryl.

"...What?"

"Thank you for looking out for my brother."

Patty glanced over at Kiryl to find him looking incredibly apologetic.

So he wasn't able to keep his mouth closed. He must really love his sister...

Memories of Hannes once again flitted through her mind.

"Is something wrong?"

"Huh?" Patty came to and found Yanna giving her a worried look. Kiryl flashed her a look of surprise.

"Wrong? What do you mean?"

"Ya just looked like you were about to cry."

"No, I'm not... I shouldn't."

Patty was aware that for a moment, her heart had wavered. But crying in front of others was preposterous. She would only ever stoop to do so when it was necessary...when crying would prove advantageous.

"Why'd you eat it for him?" Yanna stared at her as if trying to size her up.

Inconsequential. A novice would never see through me.

Patty nodded with her usual blank face. "As you said, leaving them would be a waste. But meals are best when enjoyed." With that, Patty reached her hand toward Kiryl and patted his head. Kiryl seemed surprised, but he obediently went along with it. "I just thought that once again, he may find himself in a situation where there is nothing to eat and he cannot afford to be picky, and that it would be best to properly treasure the times when there is that luxury." As she spoke, Patty realized she was being much more talkative than usual. "But I apologize. I stole food from your brother. If necessary, I can offer something in exchange and—"

“You have a younger brother, don’t you?”

Yanna’s sudden insight caused Patty to jump. “How...could you tell?” The shock caused Patty’s voice to quiver. She had no idea what she had done to allow Yanna to make that deduction.

Yanna, however, just laughed. “Ya just seemed used to dealing with younger boys. So I just assumed, y’know?” Her tone took a one-eighty, and her expression became apologetic. “Oh, could your brother be...?”

“No. It’s fine. He’s alive. His body is just weak.”

“So he’s sickly... Must be rough.”

Yanna looked sadder than Patty. She was likely considering how she’d feel if it was her and Kiryl, and if she’d be able to protect him if *he* was weak. Or perhaps she was imagining what it would be like to attend this academy without him, and she felt sympathy for Patty for having to leave her own brother behind.

In any case, Patty calmly analyzed Yanna’s current mental state. She discerned that currently, there was something she could use to her advantage. Then...

“Hey, Patricia. Do ya wanna be friends?”

Friends. That word caused a painful twinge in her heart. She had been following Serpent philosophies of analysis, reading the girl in front of her to see if she could be used to her advantage. But after having heard that word, Patricia began to feel that what she had done was terribly twisted. She thought there was no way they could call each other “friend.”

Thus, Patty had tried to shake her head, but she was interrupted.

“No, friend isn’t quite right... Comrades? Two people in a mutual contract of using the other to their advantage.”

Those words shocked Patty. But there was something funny about them —Yanna was no Serpent, but her words followed the same philosophy.

“Friends who use each other?” Patty laughed for the first time in a long while.

“What? There ain’t nothin’ strange about it. I’ve gotta protect Kiryl. No matter what it takes.” Yanna brought her voice to a whisper. “Honestly, I’m not sure if I can trust the people here. I wanna trust this Princess Mia...but I can’t completely. Not when I start thinkin’ about her betraying me...”

“You mean that if you have no lifeline in the case you are betrayed, you cannot trust her completely. Thus, you’re asking me to be that lifeline.”

Patty seemed a bit confused, but Yanna flashed her a grin—the expression of two partners in crime of a dastardly prank. “Now there’s the face I wanted.”

Patty showed this girl—a girl with a similar mercenary attitude as her—an ever so slight grin.

Comrades who use each other... I doubt this girl will do anything to help me. But...

Patty gave a meek nod. “Sure. I’ll be your friend. I’ll help you protect your brother.”

Thus, a pact of friendship was formed between these two sisters. But for now, they had no idea what this friendship of calculated interests would have in store for them.

Mia's Diary of Dietary "Education"

The Seventeenth Day of the Fourth Month

All this stuff with Patty is quite troublesome, but I've got to free her from the Serpents, whatever it takes! So, I've decided to keep (almost) daily entries tracking my progress with Patty's education.

But I had another great idea today. While my diaries always seem to dissolve into records of my meals—which causes me terrible grief—meals are also key to reforming Patty. Thus, I'll focus on writing about my meals from the start and make my observations about Patty as I do so. That way, it won't be a problem if my diary is all about food!

The Eighteenth Day of the Fourth Month

Thanks to a whole-roasted mushroom, we learned the importance of living as your heart wills you to. The mushroom was perfectly charred and delectable enough to only require a bit of salt. Through its taste on her tongue, I believe my thoughts made it to Patty. It was excellent.

☆x4

The Twentieth Day of the Fourth Month

Today I had a creamy stew garnished with mushrooms. The surface was covered with roasted cheese, like a gratin. It was an excellent addition! And the mushrooms were to die for...

No matter any embellishments, mushrooms must be able to hold their own as the dish's star. They teach the importance of having a backbone.

☆x5

The Twenty-Fifth Day of the Fourth Month

Today was a three-mushroom sauté. The abundant nature that the island of Saint-Noel has to offer really raises the best Belluga mushrooms. The secret to their delicacy is their texture. The head chef explained how he cooks them to best make use of their crunch.

This excellent show of culinary essence had Patty listening in rapture as well.

☆x4

Huh? That's strange. Somewhere down the line, my explanation of meals and my record of Patty's education appears to have swapped importance... I feel like the last bit is just about food. What a mysterious phenomenon...

Afterword: Mia's Teaching Philosophy and Her Teaching Debut

I'm Mochitsuki, and Happy New Year! It's finally 2023, which is a big year for *Tearmoon Empire*—it's the Year of *Tearmoon*'s Anime! This year, I want to eagerly run through the days by Mia's side.

A missionary I knew once told me this. When scolding children, you shouldn't tell them, "I hate you when you..." Instead, you should say, "I love you, but I hate it when you..." I remember thinking that this was quite logical, as it allowed both "loving" and "scolding" to exist simultaneously without contradiction by removing the child themself from their actions. This was the image I had in mind as I wrote Mia adorning her fabricated symbol of authority and bringing the young children of the SEEC program to tears with her pompous speech. I hope you all enjoyed this part.

Mia: "I sense some malice in those words. I sound terrible!"
Patty: "Yet he speaks no lies. Words are so mysterious."
Mia: "Hmph. It's true that's not a lie, but...the way it was phrased is begging for misinterpretation! There really was ill will behind those words... No, perhaps he was not being conscious about his phrasing. He's not exactly lying... Ugh, this is so difficult! I'll have to be careful while I'm teaching..."
Patty: "Do you mean to say it is important to calculate your words so you can manipulate your opponent, Miss Mia?"
Mia: "Hm... What Patty just said sounds terrible, but it's technically true...right? It feels true, but at the same time... Words are hard."

Now for some thanks.

To Gilse, for your adorable illustrations. I loved the cover. You could tell that Mia and Bel had grown up a bit.

To my editor, F, for always looking out for me. I look forward to another year with you.

To my family for their continuous support.

And finally, to my readers. Thank you for reading volume 12! Mia's story will continue for a little longer yet. I hope you stick around for the ride.

Well, then. To the next volume!

Bonus Short Story

The Girl Who Failed to Become the Princess's Personal Maid

"Petra Rosenfranz, I now declare you Her Highness Princess Mia's personal maid. Please watch over her with the sincerest of devotion."

Despite hearing these words from the head maid, she wasn't particularly moved. It was more just...resignation. She wasn't displeased with her position, but she didn't feel much toward it either. Thus, she accepted her new role with nothing in her heart but modesty.

To Petra Rosenfranz, the world was simple. She was born the third daughter of the high-ranked Count Rosenfranz, and her wits were incredibly quick. Living as a noble with no worries or hardship, she learned the manners of a noblewoman, as well as how to garner praise from adults and convince them to spoil her without earning their ire.

Due to these sensibilities, she had been chosen to be Mia's personal maid as soon as she had come to the Whitemoon Palace to make a name for herself. But so much was only the obvious outcome. At least, that's how Petra saw it. The lady she served—Princess Mia—was quite simple. *Too* simple, even. Any amount of flattery was enough to have her grinning from ear to ear, and then she would get carried away.

Considering their ability to share casual chats about love, cute boys, and jewelry, Petra considered her enough of a good master to serve. Still, what she felt was a far cry from "the sincerest of devotion" and Petra never even dreamed she could ever feel that way about Mia.

As long as I can swim with the tide and do an okay enough job at caring for her, I'm sure there will be no complaints.

Petra was known for her quick wits, after all. Acting like a loyalist would be easy.

One time, Petra had abandoned Mia while she suffered from a cold for a tea party with some other maids. But that hadn't been a problem for her, as

the princess had slept the whole time. No one was there to scold her if her room wasn't in perfect order either. Mia didn't watch her too carefully. Rather, what they had become were acquaintances who could casually chat as friends.

Petra was incredibly quick-witted, you see.

The empire was beginning to fall to ruin...at least, those were the rumors.

Petra had first heard it while chatting with her fellow maids. The topic of conversation had taken a dark turn, and it seemed to be set down that path. Focus on *seemed*, for in actuality, it quickly turned into a discussion about the hot, young civil official who was desperately trying to save it.

This was only natural. Who would want to feel doom and gloom while on a work break? Not Petra. It was natural to want to think those rumors were baseless. If only she could have thought that way...

"I hope he comes to the castle. Motivated, good-looking men really are the best."

While she casually chatted away with Mia, something cold had begun to take root in the corners of her mind.

The empire really might be going south. Ugh. It might get dangerous in the capital.

Petra was swift with her actions after reaching this conclusion.

"Thank you for everything until now. I will be returning to my home in the Rosenfranz domain."

With those as her final words, Petra quit being a maid. Then, she immediately returned to her natal home. Her actions amounted to treachery, for she had abandoned the princess. Yet she had no qualms, as she had never been loyal in the first place.

Once she had made her judgment, she acted swiftly. Petra was quick-witted, after all.

"Still...while I was just trying to be on the safe side, I may have acted hastily," muttered Petra as she lay in her bed at her family's estate. She had made the decision to quit her job at the Whitemoon Palace and return home on her own, and her parents were not too happy about it. "You were the princess's personal maid! What a waste!" they yapped. It was true that the

title of Mia's personal maid was hard to throw away for a girl of a high noble house like Petra. But more than anything...

"It's so boring here. The maids aren't very fun to chat with."

...for the first time, Petra realized she had quite enjoyed her chats with Mia, and that she was fond of the princess who could so easily lose herself in relationship gossip.

"Well, whatever," she said with a sigh. "I was the princess's personal maid after all, so maybe I have hopes of a good marriage prospect. I hope he's a hot, rich noble..."

And just like that, Petra lazily passed the days. However, those days didn't last long, for her premonition that Tearmoon would soon fall on tough times and take a turn for the worst had perfectly come true. Almost immediately after Petra had returned to the Rosenfranz domain, large-scale famine had begun to ravish the empire. Unable to bear their hunger, the people had turned to uprising, and flames now burned every corner of the empire, including the Rosenfranz domain.

"What an unpleasant air..." That day, as Petra gazed at the town from her bedroom window, she sensed a growing anxiety. It had first taken root a few days earlier when Petra, bored from her days in the manor, escaped into town. There, she was awestruck by the agitated atmosphere that engulfed the townspeople. Usually, their faces were much brighter, and their bodies invigorated. So just what accounted for the bloodthirsty feeling in the air?

That bubble of vague anxiety did not disappear once she had returned to her manor. Instead, it continued to grow day by day until one day...it popped.

"Death to the rotten nobles!"

"Out with the Count! It's his fault that my son..."

As the people heckled and jeered, they turned into a mob that crashed onto the manor's gates, kicking them down. The mercenaries the family had hired for protection were powerless against the overwhelming torrent of the mob. The crimson flames one of the mobsters had lit swallowed the house in an instant like a great red snake.

The horrid torrent of smoke and flames became a cover for Petra. Among the madness, she managed to escape the house—and she did more than just escape. She managed to take some coins and valuables with her.

Petra was incredibly—*incredibly*—quick-witted, you see. If you

consider how her parents, Count Rosenfranz and his wife, had been captured by the rioters and swiftly executed, you really begin to see just how praiseworthy her wits are.

Using the money she had managed to bring with her, she was able to escape the Rosenfranz domain. At first, she thought she would rely on one of her two sisters for help. But then she lost all hope. She didn't know how she would get there. She may be quick-witted, but at the end of the day, she was still just a noblewoman.

Ultimately, she decided to return to another place which had once been her home: Lunatear. While she didn't expect the capital to be safe, the Rosenfranz family had a villa there. If she could be reunited with the servants that managed it, she may be able to make it to one of her sisters. During her journey, she had squandered away what little she had managed to bring with her, and by the time she arrived in Lunatear, all she had left was a comb that served as a memento of her mother.

She dragged her tired body to the Rosenfranz villa, only to find...a hollow husk. News of the fall of the Rosenfranz domain had already reached the capital. Hearing of their master's death, the servants had quickly fled the manor so that *they* could survive, taking the house's valuables as their retirement money.

"Ah, of course... Ha ha." The moment she had laid eyes on that empty, desolate manor, all strength left Petra's body.

She sunk to the ground below her, a dry smile on her face. Her time at Saint-Noel Academy suddenly came back to her, a memory of the day she had abandoned the bedridden Mia for a tea party with some other maids. "I mean, I don't want to end up sick too," she had said with a laugh.

"This is the same, I suppose. No one wants to end up dead by foolishly staying loyal to some noble family. It's just like avoiding someone so you don't catch their cold. It's the same, but...!" Her fury demanded she stand up, but once she did...her body began to lean forward. "Huh? What...?"

When she came too, her cheek was pressed to the ground. It was cold, and it sent a shiver down her spine. She couldn't move her limbs.

"H-Huh...?"

The world blurred before her. Her brain was so muddied she couldn't think. Petra was incredibly quick-witted. Whenever there was trouble, she used her wits to escape it. However, no matter how much she racked her

brain, her wits couldn't save her from the plague that now ravaged Lunatear.

There was no wonder drug for this illness, nor were there any therapies to cure it. Thus, all one could rely on was their own constitution and their body's ability to naturally heal itself. However, Petra had just lost her home and her family, and she never could know when she may be captured by the mob herself. Faced with such extreme circumstances, her body had already been pushed to its limits.

She now found herself in a filthy alley. She had no recollection of how she had gotten there, but she was now slumped over and collapsed. The cold still raged, yet there were none who blessed her with a blanket.

Is this...how I die?

That fear had her shaking. But then...

"Ugh! Moons, that was quite the experience."

Petra shakily lifted her head. Her vision looked blurred. Everything was white.

But then she realized it was snowing. She had no strength to fight off the thick flakes as they piled onto her body. Instead, she used it all to make out the owner of that voice. The town was dyed gray, and the alley was dimly lit...but there she found a girl she knew well.

"Princess...Mia?" She strained her voice out. Having heard it, her former master, Mia Luna Tearmoon, gave her a suspicious glance.

"What is— You're... Huh?" Mia stared at her, shock plastered on her face. "Moons, are you...Petra? My! What has happened to you? What's with...?"

Mia gasped. Petra regretted calling out to her. Now deprived of her fancy dresses, jewels, and even her noble name, all that was left of her was unsightliness. She was now nothing. There was no reason a princess should have to lay eyes on her.

Not to mention, Petra had betrayed her. She failed to remain loyal, and the second she sensed any danger, she had dipped. Mia had no reason to save her, much less show her any kindness. She should be ignored. No, rather...Petra had no right to complain about any terrible fate Mia could bestow on her.

And yet...

“I’ll hire you as a maid, so please come with me to the Whitemoon Palace.” Those had been her words. They were so unexpected, all Petra could do was hang her mouth open.

“Wh-Why...?” she croaked. Her throat was on fire, but still...she had to ask. “Why...would you...do this...for me...?”

“It’s simple. I need more maids. Everyone left the palace just as you did. Plus...” Mia stared back at Petra. “It would be a great shame if I abandoned my former personal maid. That’s all.”

The banality of their exchange had saved Petra. She returned to the Whitemoon Palace—to the life she had once abandoned. While Mia had demanded she worked as a maid, that was only a formality. In reality, she had only been told to focus on her recovery.

“Rest until you’ve recovered. It’d be quite troublesome if you walked around and ended up spreading your illness,” stated Mia plainly before leaving the room. Mia would not come to visit her again, but Petra received quite attentive care. Her bed was soft and her blanket warm, and though her meals were not as proper as they had once been, she did receive meals.

Still, whenever she received such kindness, Petra would think back to that episode at Saint-Noel’s—the day she had abandoned the sick Mia for a tea party. Petra had betrayed the trust Mia had placed in her as her personal maid. The better Mia treated her, the more that fact tortured her.

“When I see her again, I need to apologize. This time, I’ll truly serve her with the sincerest of devotion.” This goal was what inspired Petra to heal as fast as she could, however...her desire never came to fruition, for the flames of revolution had begun to nip at Lunatear’s doors.

On that day—the day the Whitemoon Palace fell—Petra had awoken to the commotion and stumbled down the halls, which is where she fell swiftly into the hands of the revolutionaries. Mia and some others had managed to escape the capital, but it was only a matter of time until they would be captured.

Petra was prostrated before a man from the revolutionary army, and she immediately collapsed on the floor. It wasn’t just for show—standing really had become difficult for her. However, it proved to have its benefits.

“Oh, you poor thing. Abuse from that despicable princess has left you

weak.” The man offered words of comfort.

You’re wrong! At least, that’s what she had wanted to say, but she swallowed her words. What would happen to her should they discover she was the daughter of a high-ranking noble? Petra had heard that her parents were executed by revolutionaries, and that her sisters’ whereabouts remained unknown. If they knew she was the daughter of Count Rosenfranz —that she wasn’t a poor girl who had been abused by the atrocious princess —what would they do to her? However...

Staying silent would be a serious betrayal to Princess Mia. She’s treated me so kindly. How could I not say something?

She gathered her courage and began to open her mouth, when...

“It seems like she can’t talk in her state. I’d like to have her testify to the crimes of the cruel princess, but...”

“Don’t think it’d be much help anyway. Whatever the maid’s gotta say, all that’s left for the princess is...” He shaped his hand into a blade and hit his neck twice.

With that, Petra lost all the strength she had mustered. Then, she started to feel something in the back of her throat. Unable to hold back the urge, she cowered and found herself in a coughing fit. The two men were unable to hide their scowls; there was not a single soul in Lunatear who remained unaware of the plague that ravaged the capital.

“Well, whatever. Get.”

Just like that, Petra had been crudely thrown from the palace. While she had not escaped the hands of the revolutionaries, she had been set free with only some simple questioning. Petra was incredibly quick-witted, after all...

“N-No...” She gritted her teeth.

I’m not quick-witted. I’m just a coward. An ungrateful backstabber. Fever muddied her thoughts, but the vision of Mia on the day she saved her managed to find its way to the surface. *She treated me so well. She cared for a half-dead traitor like me, and I...*

She couldn’t breathe. Her chest hurt. She felt as if she would collapse at any moment. The capital in the winter was too harsh for her to be walking about while still fighting off illness. Still, thanks to the fact Mia had found her and helped her recuperate, she managed to find her way to her destination—a small church in the Newmoon District.

“You appear to have gone through quite an ordeal. Those clothes...

Could you be from the palace?" Prompted by the nun's question, Petra looked down at her body. When she had left, all she had managed to take with her was her maid uniform. Wrapping it crudely around herself had been how she managed to stave off the cold.

"You must have been treated terribly there."

"...Huh? Oh, no. I wa—" *Wasn't*. Petra had managed to swallow that word. She could have denied the nun's statement. Even should she have told the truth, the nun would doubtfully have turned her away.

But what purpose would that have served? It would have done little to tell those soldiers from earlier, but a nun? Nothing could come from that. Rather, telling her the truth would only serve as a way to convince herself that she hadn't betrayed Mia—that she had spoken out in her favor. Petra thought that would only be a way to relieve her own sense of guilt, just another cowardly way for her to run.

Thus, all she did was slightly shake her head, holding that guilt close to her chest so that it would never disappear.

Time flowed onward. Princess Mia was captured, thrown into the dungeon, and executed at the guillotine. Under the rule of the revolutionary army and Sunkland forces, peace and safety gradually returned to Tearmoon. At the same time, Petra's body similarly marched toward recovery. One day, when she could get out of bed and walk without issue, the nun from back then approached her.

"Oh, that's right, Petra. There's something I've been holding on to of yours from when we took you in. It was in the pocket of your maid uniform." What she presented was a beautiful comb—the one she had taken from her home, the one that now served as a memento of her mother.

"This is..." An idea sprouted in her mind the moment she took it in her hand. She realized there was still something she could do. And suddenly, she had rushed from the church before she even knew what she was doing.

Memories came back from her—the days she spent at the Whitemoon Palace. The laughs they had shared as she combed Mia's hair, the times they spent dressing up in fancy gowns, or the times they got carried away with their gossip about cute boys... That's right; she had truly enjoyed them. Now, to her, they were more precious than anything. She quickened her feet as if doing so would return those long-gone days to the present.

Combing Princess Mia's hair... That's something I can still do for her. Ah...

Her resolve wavered once she found herself outside Mia's prison. The building was intimidating...and cold.

"Right now, Princess Mia is..." Petra suddenly realized the guards were staring at her. Their disdainful eyes were enough to freeze over her heart which had been lit with flames just moments before. No matter how much she willed herself forward, no matter how much she tried to move her feet, she failed to take another step as if some unknown force was holding her back. That's when...

"I've come to care for Princess Mia." That voice was clear. Petra followed the sound to find a single young girl speaking to the guards with no hesitation.

I recognize that girl... Suddenly, Petra realized who she was. *She used to be a maid at the Whitemoon Palace. She was so clumsy. Princess Mia was always berating her for it...*

Petra couldn't wrap her mind around the fact that she would continue to serve Mia even in her captivity. It was strange, but more importantly, she realized this was her chance.

Petra approached her. "U-Um..." She wanted to ask if they could go see Mia together.

You see, I'm Her Highness's personal maid...

She wanted to say that she wished to comb her hair. That she wished to take care of her. That she wished to repay the favor she owed in any small way she could, but...

"Huh? Oh, what is it?"

...the smile on the girl's face was so genuine, Petra got cold feet. The same thought once again occurred to her. *There's no way she'll forgive me after I betrayed her thrice.*

Petra swallowed her words and shook her head. "No, it's...nothing." She had been too late. As she turned around to leave, she suddenly remembered the comb she held in the palm of her hand. "Um...take this." Petra forced the comb into the other girl's hand. "Use this on Her Highness..."

"Is this...a comb?"

"Yes. Um... Please use it to comb her hair."

"But I can't take something so nice... Ah!" As the girl tried to get her

words out, Petra ran away, convinced a traitor like her had no right to comb Mia's hair and carrying an indelible guilt with her.

Thus, Petra lived out the rest of her life caring for children at the church in the Newmoon District. She never admitted her betrayal to anyone, for she felt that if she did, it would lighten its weight. She could never forgive herself, and she wanted memories of her sins to stay as clear as the day she made them. Her life was one of self-inflicted hurt and punishment.

Then changed the flow of time...

Yup. I called it.

Standing in a corner of the hallways in the Whitemoon Palace, Petra Rosenfranz heard some bickering and casually decided to approach. There she saw a scene she had witnessed many times before—a maid of the commoner class being picked on. Petra strained her eyes and realized the victim in question was the girl who had just been chosen to be Princess Mia's personal maid. It was typical that a girl from a noble house was chosen as a princess's maid, and the position came with great honor, providing the chance to attend Saint-Noel Academy and get close to nobles of foreign countries. Quite the appealing setup.

And yet, Princess Mia had chosen a commoner for the role. This, of course, created some friction.

"Just what's with that girl? She's just a ditzy clutz..." Having finally been satisfied, the girls left still bubbling with anger. Petra decided to call out to them.

"Hey. Why don't you give it a rest already?"

"Huh...? Oh, Miss Petra." The maid looked taken aback. If Petra was remembering correctly, she was the daughter of a viscount, making her one of Petra's rivals for the spot of Mia's personal maid.

Petra shrugged. "This is what Princess Mia has decided on. There's no overthrowing it," she said as if she couldn't care less about the matter. "I mean, you're talking poorly of the princess as well. If you're not careful, it'll break her trust." Petra looked exasperated, as if she couldn't believe these maids could be so ignorant.

"Are you truly satisfied with the matter? Did you not say yourself that

you would become her personal maid and go off to Saint-Noel's?" It was one of Petra's own followers that now butted into the conversation. Petra had recruited her as an ally in her fight for the position. But Petra...just shook her head as if she couldn't understand her at all.

"Well, it's already been set. Doing all this won't change her mind; it'll only put you in a worse position. It's best you quit it already." She didn't sound all too serious as she ended her speech with a grin.

Truthfully, Petra did find it frustrating...but she had willingly and easily accepted Mia's decision. It had nothing to do with the difference of status between nobles and commoners. It was just that this klutzy maid seemed like the right person to be by Mia's side. Once she thought that, she no longer felt like complaining.

I wonder what faces my parents will make when they hear I wasn't able to become the princess's personal maid. Ugh. I don't want to go home.

Rather, that was what weighed more heavily on Petra's mind. Just as she predicted, she soon got a letter telling her, "If you can't become her personal maid, quit your job and hurry back home!" Petra decided to ignore it.

She lazily spent her days in the Whitemoon Palace. But one day, a rumor became her life's turning point.

"Hm... Saint Mia Academy, huh?"

Rumors of a new school built in Princess Town of the Berman domain caught Petra's interest.

"How ridiculous. Common orphans and those from minority tribes attend the academy. I could allow Saint-Noel's, but this school is..." came her father, but Petra decided to ignore him this time as well. She quickly enrolled. She was incredibly quick-witted, after all. There was no reason to have her hopes be reliant on her family. Plus, just as she had hoped, Petra enjoyed her time there. There were many students younger than her, but that just meant she got to play the part of an "older kid." She was able to show off, and for some reason, caring for the children felt nostalgic.

I'm supposed to be the youngest in my family, but... That latter fact often left her puzzled.

Time flew by, and eventually, she graduated. She was invited to stay there as an instructor. It seems that her care for the younger children had caught the school's eye.

“Well, if I go home, all that’s waiting for me is a boring marriage anyway.”

Her frivolous wish to have some more fun was what led her to accept the position, but she stayed there for much longer than she had anticipated. She was an excellent teacher, patient as if she had long been accustomed to caring for poor children yet never forgetting to add some humor.

Saint Mia Academy’s instructors were highly specialized in their fields. Thus, her insights on teaching and noble society were a great asset to the faculty. Thanks to her instruction on manners, alumni were able to hold their own among nobles. This greatly helped in proving that the academy’s graduates were not just big-headed bureaucrats, but intellectuals who knew proper decorum and the rules of noble society. And eventually, word of Petra’s modest yet reliable work reached the ears of Empress Mia.

That day had been long after the last time Petra Rosenfranz had set foot in the Whitemoon Palace. She had been personally invited by Empress Mia Luna Tearmoon, and as she sat on the throne in the audience hall, Mia addressed her with a familiar smile.

“It has been quite the while, Petra.”

“It has, Your Imperial Majesty. I hope you’ve been well.”

After exchanging pleasantries, Mia cut to the main issue. “You see, Ludwig has informed me that your education efforts have been a great help to graduates of Saint Mia Academy, and their reputation is impeccable. To reward you for your loyal service, I’d like to present you with a medal. Would that be all right with you?”

Petra’s expression grew cloudy. “No, I-I...I do not believe I am loyal, Your Majesty.”

Petra was not fond of words like “loyalty” or “devotion.” She couldn’t help but feel she completely lacked those qualities. She had no reason to think so, yet she was certain. Rather, it was more than that...

“I once...betrayed you.”

It was a hazy memory, and she couldn’t recall it in any concrete detail. It was more like a dream, and she didn’t believe it could have ever happened. And yet, it was a regret her heart remembered as certain.

“Once, when I should have said that you treated me well, I swallowed those words and hid them inside. And not just that. I abandoned my post

and turned my back on you. I...betrayed you." Petra didn't understand why she would say such a thing. She just felt...like she *had* to. That if she let go of this opportunity, she would never find the chance again.

"I see... I'm not quite certain of what you mean. However..." Petra's professed betrayal did not seem to agitate Empress Mia. She just listened curiously. "One must harvest the seeds they have sowed themselves. In which case...I believe you have harvested those seeds of treachery for long enough."

"Huh?"

"I sense deep regret in your words. I'm certain it has continued to stab deep, deep into your heart."

With those words, something rushed in Petra's chest—a life of regrets, one where she had long suffered from feelings of guilt. She had no memories of this life, and yet, she had certainly lived it.

Petra herself didn't quite understand her feelings, but Mia nodded as if she understood them all. "In which case, I will not have you answer for that sin. If you need to be forgiven, then I will say it right now. I forgive you for your betrayal." Mia looked into Petra's eyes. "I'd like to instead focus solely on your loyalty. You have worked hard and well as a teacher at Saint Mia Academy. I hear you give your all in their education. I believe that clearly deserves an award, no?" Mia flashed a mischievous grin and put her hand to her cheek. "Thus, I thought I would bestow upon you a medal of honor. You can have your award in a different form, if you would like. For example... Hm. Maybe you'd like some tasty sweets?"

Mia's attempt to lighten the mood with a joke had Petra giggling as well. But once she was done, she decided on her answer with resolve. "In that case, could you listen to a request of mine?"

"My, what sort of request?" Petra's answer had caught Mia off guard, but Petra only responded with a grin reminiscent of earlier days.

"Would you let me comb your hair?"

"Huh...?" Mia responded with a blank blink.

"Were you aware that I once wished to become your personal maid? I wanted to chat with you about fancy dresses and jewelry, or cute boys, or...well, I've always wanted to spend time peacefully with you."

For a moment, Mia looked as if she was watching something far in the distance. "Oh, yes... I see. So you also enjoyed the time we spent together.

It wasn’t just to serve your self-interest...” Mia broke into a full-faced grin. “Yes, of course I won’t mind. If that is your wish, I shall allow you to comb my hair.”

Petra Rosenfranz, third daughter of Count Rosenfranz and the girl who failed to become the princess’s personal maid, was preserved in history as a model instructor of Saint Mia Academy, and one of Empress Mia’s many friends.

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by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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